

MANHUNT



WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

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35 CENTS

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EVERY STORY NEW!

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- EYE-WITNESS *by Charles Sloan* 40
- REWARD *by Richard Deming* 100

SPECIAL FEATURE

- MANHUNT'S GUN RACK 71

SHORT STORIES

- A REASONABLE DOUBT *by James A. Dunn* 1
- JUMP CHICKEN! *by R. W. Lakin* 21
- WELCOME MOTHER *by Bryce Walton* 31
- INSIDE STORY *by Edward Wellen* 68
- FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE *by Hilda Cushing* 72
- GOOD AT HEART *by John Knox* 75
- THE OLD GUARD *by Michael Zuroy* 88

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ROBINSON slammed his open palm on the table and leaped to his feet.

"Goddammit, girl, think!" he shouted, his patience completely gone now. "You must have seen something, or someone. You aren't stupid, and you're not blind. Who was it?"

That was when I decided it had gone far enough. Debbie was my favorite patient and Hal one of my oldest friends.

"Take it easy, Hal" I interrupted as gently as I could, trying not to make things worse than they were. "The girl isn't on trial, and she's had a bad time of it. Screaming at her isn't going to help one bit."

He slid back into the chair, his face contorted with fury and frustration. Veins showed purple in his

a reasonable doubt

His daughter had been raped. He knew what a trial would mean . . . so he took the law into his own hands.

BY JAMES A. DUNN

neck. His forearm rose and fell slowly, rhythmically, like a hammer, as he banged the side of his clenched fist on the table top. When he spoke again his voice was hoarse, scarcely more than a whisper, and it shook a little as he struggled to control his temper. The steady thump of his fist underlined his words.

"All right then," he said quietly, but with a cold, fierce intensity. "Once more, and this is the last time. Tell me, Debbie, do you know them? Did you recognize anything at all about them?"

The girl shook her head without looking up. She had been crying and her eyes were red and swollen. Except for a small but ugly gash on her left cheek and a spot on her right jaw that was badly discolored, her face was completely drained of color. She kept her eyes fixed stubbornly on the floor.

Robinson got up and came around the table. His six-foot-two frame towered over the trembling girl.

"Look at me, Debbie," he said. "Don't try to shield anyone. These bastards aren't worth it. Was it someone you know?"

"Please, father," she pleaded. "I'm not hiding anything. I've told you everything I know."

She was a blond kid and exceptionally pretty, despite the washed-out look and the recent damage. And, at seventeen, she had a figure that was far more mature than most

girls her age. She looked up at her father helplessly.

"What more can I tell you?" she asked in a voice intense and packed with emotion. "How can I make you understand?"

Hal Robinson crossed the thickly carpeted room and dropped limply into an armchair. He rubbed a hand over his eyes. He was tired, desperately tired, and sick. I was uncomfortable and not at all sure what I should do next. Robinson's handling of the thing had been atrocious, I thought. He had been interrogating the girl relentlessly for more than an hour and he was no further ahead now than he was when he started. The girl was hurt and helpless and I felt terribly sorry for her. I was even more anxious because Hal had refused to call the police.

"Suppose I put the girl to bed," I suggested. "Maybe she'll think of something after a night's sleep. Badgering her now won't accomplish anything."

Hal seemed to have aged ten years in the last few hours. He sighed and waved a hand toward us. There was disgust and weariness and resignation in the gesture, and in his voice when he said:

"Go ahead. Put her to bed. I'll wait here."

I slipped an arm around Debbie's waist and led her up the broad, carpeted stairs. I waited while she got undressed, took another look at her lacerated back, and then, when she

had climbed into bed, gave her something to help her sleep. She winced at the needle, forced a little smile and squeezed my hand gratefully. I waited a few moments, until she started to drowse, and went back downstairs.

Hal was still in the same chair, leaning forward now, his elbows on his knees, staring into space. He looked up when I stepped down into the living room and when his eyes met mine I saw something strange and new there, a look that was as frightening as it was unexpected.

"How about a drink, Jim?" he asked casually, with a deliberate, icy calm that I found extremely disconcerting. "I think we need one."

"I don't think that's what we need at all," I snapped, my own patience almost exhausted. "I think we need the police."

He had got up, and now he paused on his way to the bar. He looked down at me, somewhat cynically, and shook his head.

"I don't agree with you," he said. "I need a drink. Sure you won't have one?"

"No," I said firmly, and then, "Hal, this is serious. You must call the police. We haven't time for drinking."

"How's Mary?" he asked with deliberate calm, ignoring my arguments.

I turned and looked at him incredulously. His back was toward

me as he plunked ice into a glass. Mary, Mrs. Robinson, had been badly shaken by the incident. I had found it necessary to get her out of the way before I could even look at my patient. I tried to contain my exasperation.

"Sleeping like a baby," I told him shortly. "I looked in when I was upstairs. She's good for the night."

He had ignored my refusal of a drink too, handing me a glass as he returned from the tiny bar in the corner. I could smell it, straight scotch and a lot of it, with nothing to dilute it but ice cubes. I put the glass on the table and waited for him to sit down before I started in again.

"Hal," I said as gravely as I could, "If you don't get on that phone right away I will. We're wasting time. Those men are getting farther away every minute."

"They're not going far," he said harshly. "I'm pretty sure they're local guys, and I'm also pretty damn sure I can find out who they are. Don't worry. We'll get them when we're ready for them."

He drained half the glass before he added, "And you know something else? I think Debbie already knows. Does that shock you?"

My face must have shown the surprise I felt, and I admitted it did.

"Something's wrong anyhow," he went on. "I don't know what it is, but I can feel it. Either Debbie's lying or she's hiding someone or something. I don't know which it

is, or why, but the whole thing smells somehow."

He finished the remaining half of his drink at a gulp, put the glass on the table, and stared hard at me.

"But we'll find out," he finished emphatically, "and we'll find the goddam punks who did it too, with or without her help. Make no mistake of that."

I don't know whether I was more shocked at his suspicions or furious at his unwillingness to take immediate action. I was certainly surprised at his bland confidence in his ability to apprehend the criminals so easily. I was on the point of protesting that such suspicions were even more reason for proceeding through normal, proper channels, but I realized almost at once that such arguments would be ridiculous. How could I, a medical practitioner with practically no knowledge of the law, tell one of the most brilliant trial lawyers in the state how to handle a legal matter that involved his own daughter? It was absurd. Who, I thought, could possibly know better than Hal Robinson the importance of quick, decisive police action in such a situation?

I glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was almost one o'clock. A lot had happened in a few short hours. I tried to think back, to get things into some sort of proper perspective.

I had just finished my office

hours, I recalled, at about a quarter to ten, and was on my way to the kitchen for a cup of coffee when Hal called. He was terribly upset and I could get very little sense out of him. Something had happened to Debbie, that was all, and it was vitally important that I get over there right away. I came as fast as I could. It takes about ten minutes from my place to the Robinsons' house.

The place was in an uproar when I arrived. Debbie was crying and bleeding, her clothing torn and dirty. Mary, her mother, was hysterical. Hal was sick with fear and worry, and half beside himself with fury. He was dangerously near to hysterics himself.

I took a quick look at Debbie but, with Mary sobbing and Hal cursing and raving, any kind of effective treatment was, for the moment at least, impossible. In desperation I gave Mary enough sodium amytal to put a horse to sleep for eight hours, and threatened Hal with the same if he didn't get himself downstairs and let me go to work. Only then, when they were both out of the way, was I able to examine the girl.

I could see immediately what had happened. Debbie had been raped. That was plain enough but, bad as it was, what concerned me even more was that she had been thoroughly and brutally roughed up in the process.

I must confess now that, quite

frankly, I was somewhat relieved after I had completed my preliminary examination. Debbie would survive. Of course, I am not minimizing the seriousness of her condition, nor am I condoning the rapists, but I had feared something worse. From a strictly medical point of view, and disregarding my own deep personal affection for her, the girl seemed to be in no immediate danger. In such circumstances there is always a physical danger of pregnancy or venereal infection and, as in Debbie's case where extensive surface damage had been inflicted, an even more serious danger of infection of a gangrenous nature.

I was immediately aware of all this, of course, just as I was acutely conscious of the more subtle and much less evident emotional disturbances that invariably accompany such a violent shock. However, I felt quite confident that with proper care we would pull her through all right.

Her face was deeply scratched and she appeared to have been punched viciously, but it was the condition of her back that puzzled me most—until I could get some sort of a coherent explanation from her. From shoulders to buttocks her entire back was one solid mass of raw, livid flesh. Her clothing was a total loss, reduced almost to tatters, but accounted for except her nylon briefs which were missing.

There were massive bruises and scraped areas on the inside surfaces

of her thighs and a considerable quantity of dried, caked blood. I detected no evidence of vaginal hemorrhage and, since my examination was necessarily hurried and somewhat superficial, I made no serious effort to determine whether or not the hymen had been perforated as a result of this particular penetration. I must have assumed that it had, I think, because I unconsciously attributed much of the bleeding to the process of defloration.

I had no reason to think otherwise anyhow, since I'm sure I had also unconsciously assumed Debbie's virginity prior to the attack. In any event there was no time for the luxury of speculation. There was work to be done, and at the moment it seemed to matter little, as long as it had already stopped, whether the bleeding had originated in the vulvovaginal area or in the multiple lacerations on her thighs and buttocks. Of more immediate importance were the procedures necessary to counteract whatever infection she may have incurred.

I might add here also that, in the pressure of the moment, and since laboratory facilities were obviously unavailable and the whole thing so clearly apparent, it never occurred to me to test for residual semen. Here again it seemed unnecessary, and I suppose I simply took for granted that it would have to be present. The evidence before my eyes seemed irrefutable.

It took me about fifteen minutes to clean the particles of dirt and clothing out of the cuts on the child's back, and another ten minutes to disinfect and dress them. While I worked I managed to get enough of the story to piece together what had happened. In essence it was simple enough, an age-old story, but marked in this particular instance by an unnatural and unaccountable viciousness.

Debbie had been at the home of a girl friend, listening to records I think she said, and later they had gone down town for a milk shake. It must have been only a few minutes past nine, and just barely dark, when, leaving her friend at the corner of State Street and Westminister Avenue, she had started home alone. She had almost covered the six long blocks on Westminister and was just about to turn into Forbes Avenue when she was accosted.

Two men had appeared out of the darkness and seized her arms, one on either side. She resisted vigorously and attempted to scream, but in the brief but violent struggle one of the men had punched her and knocked her to the pavement. Dazed from the blow and unable to regain her footing, she was helpless. The men, undoubtedly in a frenzy of fear, impatience and near-panic, had seized her legs and dragged her on her back into the heavily wooded park area along the other side of Westminister Avenue. There they took turns, one holding

her down with a hand over her mouth while the other one raped her.

Eventually I got her cleaned up and quiet, and I brought her downstairs for something warm to settle her nerves. The young are amazingly resilient and sedation seemed, just then, unnecessary.

Robinson was outraged and determined to see for himself the scene of the attack. I had no desire whatever to accompany him, feeling strongly that it was strictly a police matter, but Hal is not a man who is easily denied. Leaving Debbie sitting quietly in the kitchen with a cup of hot tea, we took flashlights, went down Forbes Avenue, crossed Westminister, and walked slowly along the hedge line which parallels the sidewalk.

It was not difficult to find the place. There was a broken spot in the hedge that looked as if someone, or something, had plunged through it. Beyond, weeds and grass had been beaten down, leaving a plain trail for about fifty feet to a small, grassy clearing in the shrubbery. There we found the missing panties, torn and bloody and almost unrecognizable.

It wasn't until much later that I fully realized that it was something more than just morbid curiosity, or a sort of masochistic self-punishment, that had driven Hal to locate the scene of the attack. He had already started his own private investigation it seemed, although of

course I couldn't have known it then, and he had no intention whatever of seeking outside help.

I watched him closely as he studied the scene, probing here and there with the beam of his flashlight. It was a strange, almost macabre scene. In the flickering light of the torches I could see a muscle in his jaw twitching. If he could have got his hands on Debbie's attackers at that moment, I'm sure he would have torn them to pieces with his bare hands. He was quite capable of it too. A big, husky chap, Hal had been quite an athlete in his younger days. I recalled that he had been a three letter man at the university and second string all-American fullback in his senior year, and he was still in exceptionally fine condition for a man of his age. I knew.

Although it seemed much longer, actually we hadn't been gone for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Except for Hal's muttered, "Here it is," when we found the break in the hedge, neither of us had exchanged a single word either in the park or on the way back to the house. Debbie was sitting right where we had left her, a forlorn, pathetic figure with a look of terror still in her eyes. I was furious with Hal for his suspicions, but he was no longer even aware of my presence. Standing over the frightened girl, the remnants of the undergarment in his hand, he had begun immediately to question her.

He was gentle at first, sympathetic and considerate, but infuriatingly persistent and repetitious. As the time dragged on, however, with Debbie still unable to add anything to her original story, he became increasingly angry, until finally he had stalked from the room in a cold rage. A few minutes later he called Debbie into the living room. I followed. It was then that he exploded in the fit of fury that had caused me, for the first time all evening, to interfere.

And now he was back at the bar, refilling his glass. When he returned he was carrying the scotch bottle with him. He placed it on the table between us as he seated himself opposite me and sat silently, lost in deep thought, for a long few minutes. He must have been trying to decide how best to express his thoughts, how to explain to a non-professional in the law an unprecedented legal situation, the crazy conflict of right and wrong that had taken form in his highly disciplined and usually well-ordered mind.

"Jim," he said at last, "have you ever been in court when a rape case was being tried?"

I admitted that I hadn't and added, somewhat irrelevantly I suppose, that at least until now my practice had been rather dull and undramatic and that it had never, even in accident cases, got me directly involved in litigation.

"Consider yourself lucky," he

said drily. "They're the messiest damn things a man can get into. I've been involved in a half dozen or so, and every one of them made me feel as if I needed a bath, both mentally and physically. Have you ever wondered how a lawyer goes about defending a client accused of rape?"

Again I told him no, that I'd never thought about it and hadn't the slightest idea.

"Well I'll tell you then," he went on, a note of bitterness in his voice now, "and you can tuck it away in your casebook for future reference. It's one of the lousiest tricks of a lousy trade. To begin with, you defend your client's interests best by waging a vigorous, offensive campaign against his alleged victim. That's fundamental. She'll be the prosecution's star witness, and it's your job to turn the tables and put her on the defensive.

"In no other situation is the old maxim about a good offense being the best defense more applicable. You go after the victim with every weapon you have. You tear her to pieces. You attack her credibility as a witness. You question her character, her virtue, her honor. You throw suspicion on her motives, her activities, her past, her friends. You use every trick in the book to discredit her story and her reputation. You try to picture her for a jury as such a slut that your client appears, by contrast, a paragon of outrageous virtue.

"You have to be relentless, pitiless, heartless. You have to be a tormentor, a torturer and, above all, a jerk—like something left over from the Inquisition."

He paused while he drained off another glassful of whiskey. He drank it like water, without even making a face.

"And you hate yourself all the while," he said, "but there's no other way if you believe in your client's innocence." Then he added, sadly I thought, "And you have to believe that even if he's guilty as hell.

"Does that sound like cynicism?" he asked but didn't wait for an answer. "It isn't really, although most lawyers eventually become cynics. It doesn't mean that a lawyer is a bad lawyer either, or an unscrupulous one, because he defends a man who is presumably guilty. It's not his job to judge or to speculate on the degree of guilt or innocence. His job is to counsel and protect, and to see that society gets no more than its just due for whatever violation of the rules his client may be charged with or guilty of.

"But it isn't always so bad. In rape charges, there is always an excellent chance that your client isn't really guilty anyhow. If he were, and you knew it, you probably wouldn't be able to live with yourself. But most of the time he isn't guilty at all. Ninety-nine percent of all rape cases are as phony as so many four-dollar bills. It takes one

hell of a lot of doing to pull off a successful rape, and it's damn near impossible to do it single-handedly."

He reached for the bottle again and filled his glass.

"Maybe that's why I'm so confused now," he continued. "I have no reason to doubt Debbie. The act was physically possible, since, as she says, there were two men. Yet, there's a note of unreality about it, and I can't help feeling that there is more to it than she's telling us."

"I think you're being ridiculous," I told him. "Don't forget, I examined her. That blood was very real."

"Sure it was," he said, "and she was raped. I'm not denying it. In fact, I'm accepting it. That's why I can't help thinking what might happen if we get into court with it. I'm trying to imagine how counsel for the defense will attack the situation. When is a sexual act rape and when isn't it?"

I had no answer so I just shrugged my shoulders. I had a very strong impression that Hal was just thinking out loud, arguing with himself. So I just sat quietly, thinking thoughts that had scarcely ever occurred to me before and waited for Hal to continue.

"Understand now, I'm referring here to situations in which a sexual act really occurred," he went on, "and not to a fraudulent accusation, the so-called frame-up in which no sexual act ever actually took place, and which incidentally, for your

additional information, happens a lot more frequently than most people think. Those things are almost hopeless. You can't win. Anyone low enough to deliberately charge an innocent man with such a crime isn't shaken by even the most ferocious cross-examination.

"I'm talking about the poor bastard who got caught playing footsie, and somebody yelled, 'Rape!'"

I decided it was time to sample my drink after all. I was frankly puzzled and I told Hal so.

"It isn't so difficult to understand," he explained patiently. "The point I'm trying to make is that far too many accusations of rape are called that simply because the woman involved chose to call it that. As I said, it's almost impossible for a man to rape a woman single-handedly. When there is only one man and one woman involved there has to be some degree of cooperation, or at the very least, expectation.

"A whore, for example, can scream rape if her client refuses to pay her. Or the adventurous gal—she could be anything from a high school kid to a middle aged woman—who gets herself caught in what the detective stories call a compromising situation. Is she justified in charging her partner of the moment with rape to excuse her own indiscretion, or to protect the lousy reputation?"

I had no answer, so I gave none, but I was learning some new ones.

"You're damn right she isn't,"

he went on, "anymore than the girl, or woman, is who has made herself available to someone in the past, maybe to a lot of someones, but who suddenly decides to play hard-to-get after she has the man, or men, worked up to fever heat. If you consider her momentary reluctance only, sure, she was raped. That is, if you abide the letter of the law alone and not the intent, and if there was indeed a forcible entry. But I'll be damned if I don't think that circumstances can be extenuating, and so will the defense attorney. And you can be damn sure he'll be trying his level best to convince a jury of it."

Hal reached for the bottle again, poured and drank deeply before he continued:

"So you see? Lawyers have to develop a certain amount of skepticism about rape. They've seen too many accusations that are outright frauds, and they've seen even more that were highly doubtful, at worse wildly exaggerated descriptions of fairly normal human relationships that somehow went wrong.

"And they have every reasonable right to presume a client innocent. They have every right to believe, if they so choose, to suppose that no genuine rape actually took place at all, and that the alleged victim was, if not actively cooperative, at least not too awfully reluctant or unwilling.

"And the whole point is this:" and here he paused to shake a fin-

ger at me. "Any counsellor in his right mind knows all this as well as I do, and he'll damn sure know how to use it in court.

"That's why I was so hard on Debbie. I had to convince myself that no such relationship had previously existed."

"And are you convinced?"

"Yes."

"Then you are going to notify the police?"

"No. I don't see the point. What I do see is some defense attorney, maybe even a friend of mine, certainly a member of the same bar, tearing my daughter to pieces in public, before the thrill-hungry eyes and ears of this whole damn town.

"And that's what he'd have to do. I know. You have to be callous, hard, pitiless. There's no room for sentiment, or friendship. You battle your way through tears and protestations, and everybody who knows you, including yourself, thinks you're a dirty, no-good bastard. But more than half the time you'll win, and your client will walk out of court a free man. Of course, you've completely demolished a woman's reputation in the process, but that isn't important. What is important is that you've won, that your tactic was successful—and you've earned your victory bath, or purgative."

In the sudden silence that followed his speech I gulped the rest of my drink. I was speechless for a moment, but when I finally found my voice I asked:

"And you think all this justifies your refusal to call the police to investigate this outrage?"

He nodded.

"I do. I see nothing to be gained by dragging Debbie through a filthy court battle. The only result can be irreparable harm to her whole future. Even if we win, and her attackers are brought to task, she loses. Nothing could ever be the same again."

I looked sadly at my old friend. We had been to school together, then the university, and finally we had both drifted back here to the county seat to practice our respective professions. He looked tired and dejected now, completely drained of emotion. All the fury and indignation of a few hours earlier was gone. He was a deeply troubled man.

"What will you do?" I asked quietly, sympathetically.

He didn't answer right away, but at last he said, "I don't honestly know yet for sure, but I must think of something. I have to. There's no alternative."

There wasn't much left for me to say. I got up to go, thinking as I did, hoping in fact, that Hal would be better able to see things more realistically by morning.

Before leaving I looked in once more at my patients. They were sleeping soundly and I felt sure that they would be all right, physically at least, after a good sleep. I hesitated even to guess at the emotional

problems they would both face in the cold light of morning.

I said good-night to Hal, suggested that he try to get some sleep, and left.

II

Hal wasn't home when I called the next morning, Wednesday, and I was rather pleased to find that he had gone to the office. Work was for him, just then and under the circumstances, the best possible therapy.

I found Debbie surprisingly well and apparently little the worse for her experience. She was stiff and sore, but that was to be expected. Mary was still badly upset, fully convinced that Debbie was ruined forever. I stayed a short while and applied some old-family-doctor, friend-of-the-family type of treatment, and I was gratified to see that it began to have a noticeable effect on Mary. She began to realize that nothing is completely hopeless.

The next morning—That would be Thursday—I made it a point to call at Hal's office. His appearance shocked me. He was drawn and haggard and, when I questioned him about it, I found that he hadn't slept a wink since I had left him on Tuesday night. I suggested, tactfully of course, a tonic and some rest, but he brushed me off. Other than that he seemed quite himself.

"Did you notify the police yet?"

I was getting awfully tired of asking the same question.

"No."

"You're still not going to?"

"No."

"Hal, look at me," I said. "You're not the man to sit quietly. What's going on? What are you doing? I think I have a right to know."

"I've engaged a private investigator. I want to know who in this town was where on Tuesday night at 9:30."

"And if you find out, what then?"

He ignored my question, busying himself with some papers on the desk. I persisted.

"Hal, this is wrong. You'll alert every criminal for miles around. They'll never be caught. I'll admit I'm no police officer, but even I know that."

He looked up at me.

"Nobody knows a crime was committed but us, and the criminals. No. We'll get them. They won't be alerted."

"But what can you gain? Why don't you let the police find them? What if you do find them yourself? Surely you don't intend to take the law into your own hands. You can't do that. No man can be judge and jury, prosecutor and. . ."

I stopped abruptly, horrified. The incredible truth struck me like a blow. Until that instant the full impact of what Hal was doing hadn't really occurred to me. I realized I had almost said, "Executioner," and a chill swept over me. The room,

so pleasant and beautifully decorated in warm, rich mahogany, seemed suddenly cold and ugly and full of hate, fear and terror.

Robinson was watching me closely, a tight, humorless smile twisting the corner of his mouth. He was reading my thoughts.

"Were you going to say hangman, Jim?" he asked sardonically.

"My God, Hal!" I almost gasped the words. "You can't be thinking of that! Do you realize what it means? You'd be a murderer."

It was a ridiculous question. Of course Hal knew what he was doing. He tried to put me off.

"Forget it, Jim," he said quietly. "This doesn't concern you at all now. Be smart and stay out of it. I appreciate what you've done and been. Thanks to you, Debbie is all right. Now you just let me carry the ball from here. I'm an old hand at dealing with the seamier side of our fair town. I know what I'm doing."

"I'm not sure you do, Hal. You've had a bad emotional shock and you're not yourself."

He grinned again, almost a sneer this time.

"You mean I'm nuts?"

"Nothing of the kind. But I can't let you do this. I'm going to the district attorney. There's more than just a matter of right and wrong here. I think there's a matter of professional ethics involved, besides the commission of a vicious and brutal crime. I'd be prostituting my oath

if I permit this to go any farther."

He let me finish before he said anything. Then:

"We've been friends for years, Jim," he said icily. "Don't spoil it now. If you try to interfere, you'll regret it. Believe me. Don't try."

"That sounds like a threat."

"I hope it doesn't have to be," he said. "I don't know myself what it means. But I do know I'm doing what I feel I have to do, and under no circumstances will I stand for any interference. I'm sorry, Jim, but that's the way it has to be. Make it easy on yourself, please, and on me. Stay out of it."

I left him then, deeply concerned, and not at all sure of what I was going to do.

Since I see no patients at the office on Thursdays, I drove directly to the club for lunch and a few holes of golf. My game was way off. All afternoon I turned the problem in my mind, but I could not come up with a reasonable solution. Unfortunately I am somewhat of a coward, and hardly a decisive person, and besides, I did feel a great debt of loyalty to Hal.

I did resolve, however, to keep a close watch on him and on his activities. I suppose I was still relying on his good judgment to find the right way out of the situation, and I simply could not imagine him resorting to violence.

I tried to tell myself all this, but I could not help remembering some of the most vicious tackles I had

ever seen made. Hal was a veritable demon when the game was critical and the odds tough. But this, I thought with increasing discomfort, could hardly be called a game. Nobody was playing. And I must confess I felt anything but confident in the immediate future.

III

As far as I knew then, nothing had happened on Friday, but I was soon to find out how terribly wrong I had been. I should have realized that a man like Hal Robinson, tenacious and overpowering, could never have allowed even one day to pass without driving relentlessly toward whatever goal he happened to be pursuing at the moment. So of course it was without my knowledge that his outrageous investigation had borne fruit. By Saturday things had begun to happen in deadly earnest.

I drove over to the Robinson's house about noon, rather pleased that Hal's investigation had produced no apparent results, and I was secretly hopeful that the whole filthy affair would soon blow over. I could not help feeling that another terrible wrong, committed this time by my dearest friend, would certainly not right a previous wrong.

It was a beautiful day, and usually there is no more lazy and peaceful spot on earth than Middleton on a Saturday afternoon in early

Spring. Dogwood spilled shaggy pink blossoms on the courthouse lawns, and a few unhurried shoppers drifted idly in and out of stores along State Street. Everything seemed quiet and normal. There was certainly nothing to indicate the undercurrent of terror that stalked the fragrant, tree-shaded streets.

I let myself in at the screened side door expecting to find Mary, and perhaps Hal and Debbie as well, in the kitchen. I got a rude shock when I found Debbie alone and in a state of nearly complete nervous collapse. I rushed to her and seized her shoulders. She was crying as if her heart were broken and her shoulders heaved convulsively. When I came near she tried to get hold of herself, but her eyes were clouded with desperation and terror.

"Debbie, what's the matter?" I asked, deeply concerned. "What happened? Are you in pain?"

She shook her head, a quick, jerky movement.

"No, I'm all right," she said. "It's him. Please, doctor, do something. You must stop him. It's wrong. He's so wrong."

Her voice trailed off into an outburst of sobbing. I was getting quite exasperated but I tried to control my impatience.

"Debbie, look at me," I said. "Who must I stop? What's so wrong?"

"It's father," she said, almost hys-

terically now. "Stop him, please. He has a gun. He's going to kill them."

Genuinely alarmed now I demanded: "Who, Debbie, who? For heaven's sake, tell me! Who is he going to kill? Where did he go?"

She broke down again, sobbing bitterly. I was almost beside myself. I could feel the short hairs at the back of my neck crawling. I shook her vigorously.

"Where did he go?" I repeated. "Tell me quickly."

"The Peanut Club, on State Street," she managed between sobs. "He thinks Ronnie and Bud are the ones who . . ." She paused, groping, for a moment, then blurted: "Who raped me."

"And they aren't?" I asked stupidly, as if guilt or innocence made any serious difference at this point, with my best friend and old schoolmate, Hal Robinson, hunting two boys down in the streets with a gun, a potential murderer.

Again Debbie shook her head.

"Then who in God's name . . . ?" I let the question trail off. "Debbie, do you really know who did it?"

Instead of answering she turned away from me and buried her face in her arms on the table. I seized her shoulder and roughly yanked her around to face me.

"Never mind then," I said. "Do you know where this club is?"

She bobbed her head up and down.

"All right then," I said, and I almost pulled her out of the chair.

"Come on. Show me. Maybe there's still time."

I hustled her out the door and into my car. I was so nervous and excited that I could hardly get the key into the ignition lock. Finally the engine leaped into life.

"Where?" I demanded as I backed recklessly out into the street. "Which way?"

"Seven hundred block east, on State Street," she said. "On the north side, in the basement under Pat's Hoagie Shop."

I swung out of Forbes into Westminster Avenue and headed downtown toward State Street. At State I made an illegal left turn into our main business street, hoping wildly that I might meet a cop, but no such luck. There wasn't a one in sight.

Westminster is at the extreme west end of town, actually outside the borough limits, in a prosperous, well-kept residential district, and I cursed softly under my breath at the fifteen or so blocks I would have to cover to reach the seven hundred block on East State Street. At that I was mildly thankful that Middleton wasn't any larger. As I threaded my way through infuriating, leisurely-paced shopping traffic and around thoughtless double-parkers, I tried to get some sense out of the distraught girl at my side.

"How did your father find out about this?" I asked. "And why didn't you tell him the truth? Didn't you realize what he might do?"

She shook her head and said, "Not right away. I was in the upstairs hall when the man from the detective agency came with his report. I didn't even know who he was, but I couldn't help overhearing what they were saying."

"And this man told your father that these two boys— What were their names?—did it?"

"Ronnie and Bud," she said in a voice that sounded tired and far away. "but he didn't really say they did. He didn't know for sure. All he said was that nobody seemed to know where they were on Tuesday night and that both of them had returned home late with torn and muddy clothes, and Bud's face was scratched."

"What did your father do then?" I asked.

"Nothing right away," she said. "He just thanked the man and wrote a check."

"That's when you should have told him," I said. "Why didn't you speak up, if you're so sure these boys are innocent?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I was too frightened, for myself. Besides, I didn't realize what he intended to do. He seemed to be just as calm as usual. When I heard him start up the stairs I went back to my room and waited. A few minutes later I heard him go back downstairs and I heard the car starting. Then I began to get frightened. I don't know what made me do it, but I went and looked in his bureau

drawer. He kept a gun there, only now it wasn't there. I felt sick, and I had the most horrible feeling that something awful was going to happen.

I swore as I maneuvered around a car driven by a woman who had stopped suddenly to wave at someone.

"You're damn right something is going to happen," I muttered through my teeth, and I offered a silent prayer that I'd be in time to keep Hal from making the most terrible mistake of his life.

"Debbie," I continued after I'd got the car back on the straightaway again. "You've got to tell me the truth. I must know if I'm to save your father's life. If you're so sure that these boys aren't the ones who assaulted you, then you must know who did. Who were they? You'll have to tell us."

"Nobody," she said, and she started crying again, softly, as she buried her face in her hands.

I was stunned.

"Nobody!" I fairly exploded. "Do you realize what you're saying, girl? What do you mean *nobody*? Somebody must have attacked you."

She raised her eyes as if she were going to tell me, but suddenly something took her attention. Instead of answering my question she leaned forward and shouted excitedly:

"There they are! That's Ronnie, and Bud."

I tore my eyes away from the

traffic and followed her pointing finger. All I saw were the muscular backs of two well-built young men in white sport shirts and faded, tight-fitting, low-slung blue denims as they crossed the street diagonally ahead of us and headed toward a doorway beside the entrance to a luncheonette.

I looked around hurriedly for a place to park and, without looking at Debbie, asked, "Is that the club?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "And there's daddy's car up ahead. See it? There, on the right?"

I pulled ahead and stopped beside the Cadillac. It was his all right, but there was no sign of Hal. It took me a split second of rapid calculation to decide that time was running out fast. I abandoned the idea of parking and simply stopped and leaped out, leaving the car, its motor still running, standing in the middle of the street. We were about a hundred feet from the entrance to the club and I risked disaster as I danced recklessly across the street and through traffic. I called out, but the boys were already inside and out of sight. Brakes squealed about me and drivers swore, but I paid no attention as I raced after them and plunged through the doorway into the club.

For a moment I was lost in the sudden gloom after the brilliant sunlight, but in an instant my eyes had accommodated and I started down the steps into the club rooms.

Almost before I could take in the whole deadly scene before me Hal's voice barked out at me from the dimly-lit room, harsh and vicious, and totally unlike his usual, beautifully-controlled courtroom voice.

"Goddammit, Jim, what are you doing here?" he snarled. "I told you to stay the hell out of this."

I literally screamed at him.

"Hal, for God's sake, put that gun down! You're making a terrible mistake."

"Wrong, doctor. No mistake," he said with icy calm. "These two punks made the mistake. Isn't that right, you bastard?"

And as he addressed the boy nearest him he swung his arm around in a sweeping half circle and caught the boy across the cheek with the gun barrel. The kid threw his arm up too late and as he fell back against the wall the side of his face puffed up like an angry balloon. I remember wondering if Hal had broken his jaw.

The other boy, a good-looking kid and slightly taller, whom I later learned was the one called Ronnie, for Ronald Lockwood, lunged toward Hal, but Hal stopped him cold. He thrust his arm forward and down until the gun was pointing at the exact center of the boy's body and a few inches below his belt buckle.

"Just breathe wrong, punk," he hissed, "and I'll blow that thing right off you. You'll never think of raping anyone again."

The kid's face lit up in genuine surprise.

"Rape?" he said incredulously. "What're you talking about, dad? You must be way out. I don't know about any rape bit." Christ! I've gone for a lot, but I never had a rape charge. You must be nuts." There was a note of panic in his voice.

"The boy's right, Hal," I interrupted, pleading with him. "He didn't do it."

"Jim, you're a sentimental damn fool. He's lying in his teeth to save his stinking, lousy life, but it won't pay off. He's going to get what's coming to him. I'm sorry you butted in. I told you not to interfere. Now you'll see something you'll regret for the rest of your life."

"It'll be you who regrets it, Hal," I said with desperate intensity. "These boys are innocent. I know. Ask Debbie."

His face twisted into a kind of sneer, an expression I had never even imagined possible on his usually good-natured face. He was like an animal, cornered and irrational, caught in a frenzy of hatred and blood-lust, powerless to control himself. I watched him closely, estimating the depth of his disturbance and the possibility of seizing the gun from him. The smaller boy straightened up now, thoroughly frightened, and I was relieved to note that he could still talk.

"Mister, I don't know what you're talking about," he said excitedly. "I

never raped anybody in my life. We don't know nothing about no rape, do we, Ronnie?"

"He's right, Hal," I pleaded again. "Listen to him."

"Shut up, Jim," he said curtly, but he had decided to listen. Without moving the gun which he kept pointed unwaveringly at the boy's middle, Hal took a step backward and the boy started to breathe again.

"All right, kid," he said to Ronnie, "talk. I'll listen. Tell me about Tuesday night. You were home all night watching television, right?"

"Oh, Christ!" the boy exclaimed. He threw his head back and thrust his arms stiffly down and forward, palms outward. Somehow there was an expression of utter relief in the gesture.

"That's what's bugging you, is it?" he went on. "Okay, so we're caught, but mister, you're making an awful mistake if you think anybody got raped. We didn't even see anybody. All we did was break a window and steal a few tires, you know, for spending money. But rapel Honest to God, mister, there was no rape."

There was a ring of absolute truth in it, and I believed the boy. Thief maybe, but rapist no. His explanation was so simple and it cleared up so many things. I felt positive that Hal wasn't nearly so convinced of his guilt now either.

But before he could make up his mind what to believe there was a shrill little scream from above and

behind me and Debbie came running down the steps. Startled, Hal turned toward her just as she threw herself into his arms. Everything happened so fast then that I'm still not absolutely sure which came when, but I think this is how it happened.

I heard Debbie cry out, "Oh daddy, please, no!" and then there was a deafening crash as the gun in Hal's hand went off. The room was suddenly filled with acrid smoke, and Debbie sank slowly to the floor. The two youths and I sprang into action at the same instant, all three of us leaping toward Hal as if on signal. I think it was I who got there first and knocked the gun to the floor, but I didn't stop to look. Instead I dropped to my knees beside the inert figure of the girl.

Frantically I ran my hands over her, rolled her over and did the same thing on the other side. Then, spent, limp and trembling like a palsied thing, I leaned back on my heels and looked up at Hal.

"You lucky bastard," I said in a hoarse whisper. "You missed. She only fainted."

I remained there for a few seconds, on my knees, while I tried to gather my scattered wits, and there wasn't a sound in the room. Then I got up slowly and turned to the boys.

"All right, fellows, it's all over," I said. "Give me the gun and then get the hell out of here, fast."

I picked Debbie up and carried her to a sofa. Hal sank wearily into a battered, cast-off armchair, his face colorless and haggard, a mask of fear and remorse. I expected he would be sick. When I had got Debbie back to herself—and it only took a few short moments for, as I said earlier, the young are amazingly resilient—I shook Hal back to reality.

"Let's go home," I said. "We've had a busy day." And I led the pair of them up the steps and through an excited, chattering crowd that had gathered at the top of the steps and on the sidewalk beyond.

"Everything's all right," I assured them as we passed. "I'm a doctor. A gun went off, and the girl fainted. That's all."

And as I said it, I breathed a fervent little prayer that that was all that really had happened.

IV

Several hours later, after we had returned to the Robinsons' house, Hal was making drinks. He was visibly shaken, his face drawn and his hands trembling.

"Damndest thing I ever heard of," he said uneasily. "I guess I'll never understand how kids figure things. You'd think she might have confided in us."

Despite the gravity of the situation, and the fact that I was even more upset than he was, I could not restrain a wry smile.

"You forget you're something of an ogre at times," I told him. "Did it ever occur to you that the girl might be afraid of you?"

"Maybe you're right at that," he conceded. "I hope we've all learned a lesson from this."

Hal and I were alone. Debbie was resting, and her mother, who hadn't returned from a shopping trip, was yet mercifully unaware of the near tragedy that had been averted. I had already arranged for the girl's admission to Midcounty Memorial on Monday for a complete physical check-up, so there wasn't much to be done just then. This time it was I who had suggested that we needed a drink and Hal agreed. Now he handed me a glass, and he shook his head in a gesture of what can only be called resigned, parental bewilderment.

"Imagine her making the whole thing up," he said, "staging an unholy mess like that just to keep us from finding out she was pregnant. I just don't see that kind of reasoning."

I remained prudently silent. I thought it would be much better all around if Hal left it at that and was content to remain in blissful ignorance of the even more incredible details which I, as physician and adviser, had heard. Even now, I still go a little clammy and cold-sweaty when I recall the sound of that young girl's voice dispassionately using words and phrases which even I, a hardened old pro-

fessional, use only sparingly and then almost haltingly. I remember thinking that either I was getting older or the world was growing much wiser. Why it seemed only months since I had been treating her for measles and chicken pox.

In any case, her plan had been disarmingly simple, and it almost worked—if her father hadn't been such a stubborn idiot. She wanted an abortion, and she thought her parents would consent if they could be made to believe that her pregnancy had resulted from a criminal attack, and she was probably right.

Fortunately, and perhaps mainly because he was deathly sick of the whole business, Hal was satisfied to

accept the story that Debbie and I had contrived, that it had been a casual indiscretion at a party with an older boy who was visiting from college and who had virtually overwhelmed her girlish innocence. I'm not at all sure how he might have behaved had he ever learned the real truth: that the father of Debbie's unborn child, and her partner in her monstrous pretense, was a recently graduated young chap who worked in his own law office.

At any rate he wrapped the whole thing quite neatly when he said:

"It's a damn shame how some people will take advantage of an innocent child."

I couldn't help smiling.



"You've no love of life," she shrieked. "You're a mummy!" How little she knew of the love of life . . . or the cost of preserving it.



jump chicken!

BY R. W. LAKIN

THROUGH the mottled colors and shapes of his troubled dream, he became aware of movement outside himself. His arm thrashed out to ward off this additional burden to his unconsciousness. When his leg joined his arm in its macabre dance

of rebuttal, it hit against the coffee table, sharply. The pain woke him.

Slowly, he knitted his frame into a sitting position on the cramped couch.

"She's going to jump!"

The shrillness of the cry pene-

trated him from outside the window against which rested the coil laden couch. He thrust himself up to the sill and squinted out into the calm and cloudless night. At first what caught his attention was the sky tapestry with its myriads of gold thread stars, but the voices pulled his glance downward, down nine stories to the yellow convertible parked askew in the street. Its two occupants, draped about it statue-like were all that was alive in the world, or so it seemed.

The two toy figures were looking up, pointing at him. No, not at him, but something to his left. He twisted his head to look along the slim ledge that girded the building.

"My God, my God!" He sucked his breath inward. "Mildred!"

His sister stood there, not leaning on the brick wall, rather tilting away from it toward the chasm of air. Her eyes were open and he wondered if she were asleep. Maybe she was sleepwalking, maybe she would walk back into the room without waking . . . maybe she . . . His body chilled. Maybe it was the other thing. *Please God, don't let it be the other.*

He withdrew inside the room, afraid of any movement that would startle her. His body slid down the couch and once again hit the coffee table. He rushed into the bedroom that had been his alone until earlier this evening when his sister had walked in on him.

He thought of his nakedness and

felt vaguely guilty for taking the time to put on his robe.

Now, with caution, he moved his head out the bedroom window. She stood just out of his reach. Nothing had changed in the time it had taken him to traverse the two rooms. His sister maintained her waxen pose, looking like some madonna, her hands clasped chastely under her breast.

"Hey, you up there! What's she gonna do?"

His head jerked downward to the man who shouted. He stood next to the yellow convertible, leaning against the front fender, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The other one, the girl in the red evening gown, walked toward the man, her high heels clicking on the silent pavement, her steps wobbly and unsure. When she reached him, her body seemed to jerk. His motions matched hers and they seemed like two puppets without strings. Their heads met and bumped. She giggled. Mildred's brother realized they were drunk.

Go away, please go away, he told them in his mind.

Mildred's eyes were opening now. Would she panic and fall? He clenched his fingers, waiting.

"Hello Freddy," she said pleasantly. "Isn't it a lovely night?" Her hand made a wispy motion toward the lovely night; in greeting.

He felt his skin drain of color. She hadn't been asleep. It was this thing the doctors gave a five sylla-

ble name when they let her out of the hospital after her breakdown.

"Watch me, see me, Freddy?" She singsonged and he grew dizzy watching her bob at him.

What should he do? Should he try to get the doctor? No, he mustn't leave her here! Why did she come into his life like this, complicating everything? She was like a firefly that flitted from nowhere to anyplace. She always breezed in on him, smelling of far away places and deeds she had done that he would never do.

"You know something, Freddy? You go through life walking on eggs." She told him this one night after she had rudely walked in on him. He had just moved into this apartment. He was busy putting his dishes away in the cupboard, humming to himself. She walked in without knocking. She laughed at him because he enjoyed domestic tasks. Was that a crime?

"Like walking on eggs! Not me, boy. I go through life smashing those eggs, loving the runny yolks and the slippery whites all mashed together."

He shuddered. Her phrases always made him nauseous. He stumbled and bumbled, trying to make her leave. "... Mildred ... this is a man's hotel and ..."

"Nonsense. I'm not a woman. I'm a relative." And she talked loudly all evening, as if defying someone to force her to leave.

"You know what's wrong with

me, Freddy? You know what the doctors say?"

"No, no!" His hands went up warding her off. "You don't have to! It's not my business to pry."

She laughed in raucous delight. "You aren't your sister's keeper, are you Freddy? Poor dear twin. The other half of a double yolk. Or should I say—joke? How ugly of Mom and Dad to die and leave you nothing but me."

He poured her coffee, anything not to face her grimacing wide mouth and her disjointed body.

"I'll tell you anyway. All about my neuroses that jumped the fence and became psychoses." She settled back and sipped her coffee. "I'm just a gal who needs to feel she is the center of attraction. Just the opposite of you, boy. I'm no thinker. I'm a doer. I'd do anything! Why I'd even jump off the Brooklyn Bridge if someone dared me!"

He heard the crash of glass and looked down the building at the liquor bottle, its contents dribbling into the gutter. The drunken couple were coming to life and they did little pirouettes hoping to draw Mildred's attention.

"Mildred," he whispered, "don't you think you ought to come in?"

"Why Freddy? It's so peaceful out here." She frowned. "Am I embarrassing you again?"

Her voice had a hoarse quality to it. Her fingers twisted and weaved as if they lived lives of their own.

He could see her fingers that first visit to the apartment, moving over the back of his couch, touching the fabric.

"Nice, Freddy, but chintz! Chintz for a man?" He wrapped his bathrobe closer to him and she noticed that too.

"You wrap life about you like it was a winding sheet! A mummy, that's what you are. A mummy wrapped in chintz. You be the mummy and I be the poppy." She sang it as an eerie song and danced around him, laughing at some secret joke.

He pushed her away roughly. Her kaleidoscope personality frightened him. Even though he was furious with her, he could not find the strength to prevent her from staying overnight and sponging from him again.

She descended on him periodically. Sometimes she was pensive and did not talk much. Other times, she was wild and called herself Hurricane Mildred and, indeed, she razed the apartment, leaving him a shambles to repair. Sometimes she cried, her body wracked and throbbing. Always, whatever her mental state, he rode through it on the crest, letting the emotional charges carry him. Never getting wet.

But that night was the worst she had been. As she battered herself against him, fists pummeling, he restrained himself. She's sick, he had told himself. She's sick. Over and over, fighting the revulsion.

"Why do I come to you? You can only destroy me. But help me, Freddy. No, don't help me. You can only pull me down, down, down into your depths."

She hit him and pulled hairs from his scalp. "Why do you live, Freddy? You so obviously don't enjoy it. Why, Freddy, why? Why do you hold on so tightly? To torment me?"

"Please, Mildred," he said, losing patience. He disengaged his arms. "Why must you always make scenes?"

Somehow he got her quiet and as she lay on the couch dozing, she managed one more.

"Freddy, Freddy, how did you ever get through the war?"

He watched her eyelids slip closed and he knew she did not see the twisting of his mouth.

The war, Mildred? I got through the war by crawling sideways when the others crawled forward. When they left their holes to charge, I burrowed deeper. And when the shrapnel whizzed overhead I pissed my pants. But who knew this? I don't like life? Is that so, Mildred! All the others, they died. But I knew how to live through it. So don't you see, Mildred, it's me, Mildred, me, who really loves life.

The weaving, waving motion of her body reminded him of something . . . something. Suddenly there was bile in his throat. Burma . . . The Snake. Listing. Hazel col-

ored, marked with blotches . . . it was swaying there in front of him. Brian!

His closest buddy slept on a cot unaware of death hanging over him, while on the other side of the room Freddy lay. What was it woke him? Sweat ridden, dopey still from the quinine, his awareness of the snake woke him. Hanging there over Brian's inert form, Freddy wanted to scream, but the scream was a rasp held behind glued lips.

And fitfully, near Brian, slept Porter, an unpleasant man, friend to neither of them. Porter performed a funereal dance, emanating from stomach discomfort, twisting, groaning, throwing himself. When would the viper catch Porter's movements in the periphery of his vision? Then Brian . . .

Freddy watched the coiling and uncoiling in horror. Inside, he could feel the other one, the other snake slithering in time to the one on the rafters. This internal, infernal one he knew well. It was the color of pulsing blood and fire, surging and tearing through him.

Don't move, Porter, please, please, don't move, he begged in terror. Like a tattoo the thoughts beat against his brain. Wake Porter? No, it might trigger the snake. Reach for his gun? Shoot the monster? No, his hands shook too much. He would miss.

The churning thing inside surged again. In his life there was always

something moving inside him. Something that would not let him act. *Can't you see, Brian, he screamed in silence, it won't let me help you! God help me!*

Brian's eyes opened slowly. He looked at the snake, and then, stricken, toward his friend. Freddy's eyes were shut tight, the lids flickering slightly.

Later, much later after the snake had moved on, Porter, Brian and Freddy shared a cigarette.

"Jeez," Porter said, "I can't get over it—me and Freddy sleeping through the whole thing. You poor sonufabitch, you hadda lay there, like for an hour and nobody knew to help you. Why, my moving around could'a finished you. Why, why, it would of been like I was a murderer!"

Porter saw the look in Brian's eyes and interpreted it as personal accusation.

"Well, jeez, Brian, I was out cold at the time. I couldn't be responsible for something I couldn't do nothing about. Or could I?" Porter covered his face with his hands and shuddered.

Freddy got up and walked back to his cot, slowly. Were Brian's eyes following him or was he imagining it?

He was relieved when Brian caught a sniper's bullet through the throat the next day.

The voice broke through his reverie.

"Hey, lady! You doing a dance or something up there?"

Mildred smiled, although only Freddy could see it. She lifted the folds of her nightgown and made swirls in the sky with them. "Like my dance Freddy?"

From below, hollow clapping sounds wafted up.

"Encore, lady, give us more."

She leaned her body as if to pirouette and Freddy thought about the goosepimples forming on his flesh. *Flesh*, he thought, *that's a word people seldom use nowadays*. Then he was angry with himself for allowing his mind to leave his immediate problem. His sister was going to plunge nine stories to her death. He must do something.

She was moving along the ledge, one, two, three steps, then she kicked one foot out. Then back again, three steps. Loud and clear she sang, "Cui, cui, Conga, cui, cui, Conga!" A hideous grimace filled her face.

Down below the drunken lovers mimicked her dance, egging her on with attention.

She bowed, Thank you my audience, thank you. She bowed again, and almost missed her footing. She stood there spread eagled against the brick, panting. Her hands showed white from clutching the brick. And through the layers of her insanity, she realized her danger.

The couple grew restless. They smashed open another bottle and

drank from its jagged mouth.

Mildred turned to her brother, her eyes wide with terror. The hazel pupils begged him to tell her why she was there; they pleaded with him to direct her now that she was beyond self-control.

"Hey, up there. You gonna jump or not?"

"Yeah, right here. X marks the spot!"

The two chorused up to Mildred, buzzing in her ears, making her wring her hands at them to pry their suggestions away.

"Hey, lady, jump! Don't be chicken!"

"Yeah, jump. Hey mister, you at the window, make her jump!"

Mildred grew more frantic, twisting to ward off the verbal blows, reaching toward him and yet not reaching.

As he stood there wallowing in his horror, Freddy let his hatred for the drunkards grow and divide and grow again more turbulent. *Damn them, damn them, stop it you damn murderers*. He wanted to shout it to them, but all he felt was the sandpaper of his tongue.

And the twisting thing inside him came to life again.

. . . She's sick . . . it doesn't matter what happens to her. Her mind's broken anyhow. Let the body fall to pieces too! If I save her she'll plague me . . . Do you hear me, Brian? Stop plaguing me! . . . A jack in the box popping in when life is good to me . . . to spoil it.

He laughed in relief. It would be euthanasia for her sake and immolation for his own. Hysteria erupted in him. And that couple. Tomorrow after the hangover . . . Like Porter . . . tomorrow they would call themselves murderers.

As he leaned closer to her, a smile pledging confidence fixed itself to his face. He decided to change the sheet on the bed to the one scented with lavender.

Mildred cocked her head, waiting for succor.

"Brother. Freddy . . . help me!"

His voice twisted into a sob and his hands almost reached out to hold her, but the thing inside coiled waiting to spring. The words were a hoarse whisper dredged from his guts.

"Mildred, jump."

Her face became gelatinous trying to form comprehension, as her body, a separate entity, prepared to respond.

His whisper became a roar.

"Jump, chicken, jump!"



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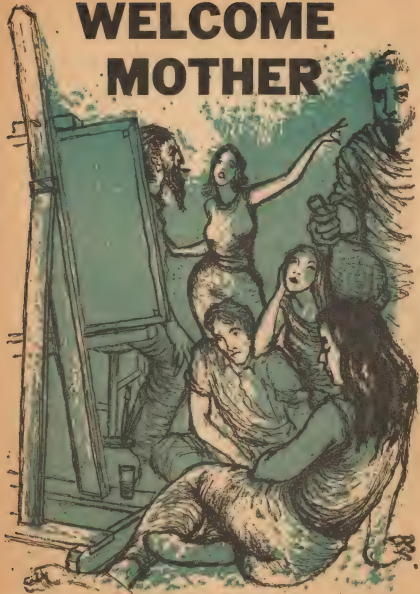
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WELCOME MOTHER



*Sweet smoke and sour wine, throaty women, jazz, poetry filtered through beards to smiling Buddhas . . .
He lay alone on his couch with the telephone pressed to his mouth, and he conjured visions for the wide-eyed ear of his mother.*

BY BRYCE WALTON

THE PHONE rang. It was as though electrodes had suddenly been attached to Norman's head. It rang three times. After a two-minute intermission it rang three more times. Creative genius should not be interrupted by having to answer superfluous calls. That was the reason for this prearranged signal. The truth was, however, that the only other calls Norman ever got was an occasional wrong number.

He rolled over on the studio couch, flipped on a stereophonic tape recorder with his right hand and lifted the receiver with his left.

"Hello across the miles, Ma," he said above the smoky, beatnik drone humming from the tape, a girl moaning incoherent jazz, several voices mingled in indistinct argument, glass tinkling. He turned up the volume.

"Hello, son, hello there!" Her voice was even louder than usual. It might have been right there in the room instead of a thousand miles away in Arkansas. "Lordy, son, what's going on there?"

"You know, Ma, Bohemia, Bohemia."

"But, son it's only nine in the morning!" She giggled and that, too, was loud, like the stepped-up sound of a burbling pigeon.

"The wine never stops flowing here," he said.

"What was that, son? I can't quite make out above the din."

"Day turns to night, nights to day in Beatville."

"I can't hardly hear you," she shouted. "You must be really swinging it there!" She laughed in that sly, conspiratorial way. They had a secret all right. And if the other girls in Lakeville, Arkansas, only knew how Mrs. Borden's only boy was a crazy gone arteest living in Village sin. Man, man.

"A real ball," Norman said.

"Norm! Can't you quiet them down some? I'm yelling myself hoarse."

"Die a little," he shouted across the empty room. "I'm trying to talk to my Ma." He turned down the volume on the tape recorder.

She giggled again. "Son, it sounds

like the same party as last time."

"It is, Ma."

"Why that was two weeks ago."

"This blast drifts from one apartment, one bar to another night and day." He turned. "Hey, creep, throw me a butt."

"Who was that, son?"

"Just an old bearded beat we call the Cockroach. He reads Proust out loud, right out the window to a deaf and dumb world."

"Son, you do beat all. How you feeling, chipper?"

"A little worried," Norman said.

"Why you was always a little worry-wart! You know that."

"Yes, yes, I know it."

"You're sensitive, always been sensitive. Artists are like that. They worry and worry."

"Yes, but I didn't get the check."

"Don't you worry about finances, son."

"My rent's due tomorrow."

"Just don't you worry, son. I've got a big surprise for you." Her voice lowered, but still came through with throbbing power. "How's Betty?"

"Betty? Oh—she's the greatest."

"The greatest what?"

"Just the greatest, the most."

"Is Betty there now with your mad friends?"

"Ah—not right now, no, she was here, but she left. You know she's a model, she poses for calendars and things."

"Oh my, I didn't know that," she said, loud again, and laughed diz-

zily. "I'll bet she's just beautiful isn't she?"

Norman's eyes closed tightly. A sudden wet smear appeared on his upper lip. "Just like Marilyn Monroe, Ma, like I said, only now she's got her hair dyed black."

"I wish she was there now, son. I wanted to say hello."

"She would want to say hello, too, only she isn't here now."

Norman opened his eyes, looked at his watch. She never talked more than the standard three minutes for long-distance calls. She had already talked five.

And no more mention of what had happened to his monthly check. A near panic threatened suffocation at the possibility of not getting his allowance. He would have to go out there into the crowd. And there was nothing, not a thing he knew how to do.

"Ma, my rent—"

"You're really serious about this one, aren't you, son?"

"This guy hates artists. A bourgeois tyrant! If I don't shell out right on—oh, you mean Betty?"

"You said she was sure to end up in the movies and on the television."

"Yes, she's already been on the television."

"Norm! She has, really? And you're really serious, I mean it's a steady thing like?"

"This is really it, Ma."

Her voice turned shrill with some intense but purely unanalyzable

emotion. "I'm so glad, so glad for you, Norm. You were always so timid and shy. All gifted kiddies are like that, but I was always so worried. Oh my, your first really grown up steady girl friend! Son—I've got to see her!"

"You sure will. One of these days my darling Betty and I, we will come driving up the road there past the old lumber mill and—"

"I mean today, this evening, son!"

"What?"

She laughed. "Haven't you guessed the surprise? I'm here! I'm here, son, I'm here in little old New York!"

A kind of blurred focus returned to the almost empty, ill-lighted room.

"Son! Something wrong? What is it?"

"No, no," he whispered as his voice came back. He forced out a gagging laugh. "I think some of my old buddies here poured me a Mickey or something." He turned up the volume a little, heard the distorting laughter above cracking glass, the voice reading some kind of crazy poem somewhere in a smoke-filled, jazz-throbbing cellar he had never been in. Bits and pieces, sounds and echoes picked up from records, tapes, radio programs . . .

"I'll bet you're smack-dab in the middle of a big artistic masterpiece. Isn't that it, son? I've bungled into one of your creating times. I read

about it in *Cosmopolitan*, all about artists and how they get these creating times."

"I'm working on a big thing all right, but your being here sure is more important than my dabblings of the moment. This is wonderful, Ma. I never thought you—"

"You tell me the truth now. You just tell me. I'll understand, you know that. I've plenty of time, oddles of it. You just go on and paint. Why I'm going to be here two weeks!"

"Two weeks."

"Two whole weeks, son! Maybe I can stay longer if you're in a creating time. You'll show me everything, won't you, show me all over the Village, and those little shops with crazy things you told me about, and that crazy place with those screwy pictures, and the dinosaurs . . ."

"Where you staying, Ma?"

"The Riverside Hotel, on the Hudson. I'm looking out there now, at the Hudson, and there's a ship a mile long moving along there. I saw the Empire State Building a minute ago. Son, it's really something for sore eyes, believe me. But you'll have to show me everything. I wouldn't know where to go, I'd just wander around here like a chicken with its head off!"

"Sure, Ma, we'll have a ball," Norman said.

"You sure I'm not butting in on a big artistic masterpiece?"

"No, no you're not."

"Then what about my coming over to see you and that wild mad apartment you've been telling me about." She giggled. "And maybe we can have a drink of wine together. I can meet Betty. Then we can all go out on the town. I been hearing about the Embers. I think we ought to go to the Embers. Now don't you worry about finances, son. It's worth ten times more than I'll spend to have my boy take me around here."

"Sure, Ma. When'll you be dropping by?"

"Well, I want to see you soon as I can! I'm going to do some shopping now, want to pick up a hat, and some other things at a place right up the street here, on Broadway."

"Better make it later, maybe around five-thirty, six," Norman said. "The mob will be pulling out of here this afternoon. And—"

"But I'd like to meet them!"

"You will, but they have to move on. It's moving day. And Betty can't be here till after five. And I have to buy art supplies—"

"All right, son, six o'clock. I'm just dying to see that crazy apartment, from the way you described it. And Betty."

"Well, the apartment really isn't much," Norman said. "Take out the people and the wine bottles and cigarette butts and what's left? Material possessions, futile symbols of the rat-race, have no place in our far-out world, Ma!"

"I don't know what you're saying, son, but it's fascinating!"

That made it easier for Norman because he didn't know either, and if he happened to misquote something he'd read in a Kerouac book or heard on a record, she didn't know the difference.

"You've always been too much of a genius for my poor little brain, son. Now I'll see you and Betty at six. And we'll go out on the town!"

He sat in vapid emptiness. A room naked but for a couch, a coffee table, a tape recorder, a small clock radio, pinups of Betty Martin clipped from magazines and pinned to the wall. That was it. No beatnik debris, no leftovers from some lengthy esoteric palaver, no scraps dropped during a secretive creative binge. No canvases. He had a horror of dirt. He didn't smoke. Wine made him sick. There wasn't a single cigarette butt in evidence, nor anything resembling a wine bottle.

He glimpsed himself in the bathroom mirror, a barely recognizable ghost, gray and bloodless. But then he looked the part. No doubt about that. But there were no props, not one. And everything had to look so right that Ma wouldn't ask him any questions.

Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies. That was it.

He could have said that Betty wouldn't be here today or tomorrow or the day after, but he could-

n't stall two weeks let alone forever. Over the phone, yes, especially over a thousand miles of it. But he had never been capable of fibbing to his mother. Not when she was looking at him. She knew he was lying before he even opened his mouth. There had been times when she had known he was lying when he didn't even know it himself.

He got the easel from the closet, and the several half-finished canvases that some crazy artist had left in a junkshop on 3rd Avenue. He set up a box of paints, a jar of brushes. He worked in a growing frenzy. Although it was early in the day there was much to be done.

He flicked fresh paint over the canvases, on the floor, the walls, himself. The canvases were unintelligible blobs. Nothing he could do would make them more or less meaningful. For all Norman knew they had been started by a monkey.

He had collected the stuff, along with a camera and flash-bulb equipment, in order to take pictures of Norman the artist at work. He intended to send the pictures to his mother, after having them made into Christmas cards.

He knew that Betty would go along with the gag. He knew a great deal about Betty, and he knew positively that she would understand. All he had to do was explain exactly what the situation was and Betty would go along with him one hundred percent. You only had

to look at her, listen to her talk, to know she would understand.

Funny how after years of loneliness you met a girl like Betty and there was instant rapport, attunement, similar vibrations meshing without a word having to be spoken either way.

He looked at his watch. Almost four o'clock already.

He flung a jar of blue oil across the wall, then went out and ran noiselessly down the hall to the door of apartment 5-H. He listened a moment and sighed with relief. The radio playing *The Desert Song*.

He was lucky in at least one way—this was Monday. And Betty always stayed home Mondays. He had heard her tell the apartment manager one evening in the lobby that this was her work-at-home-day. He listened another minute to the Riff song, heard the rewarding tapping of a hammer on the wall. She painted, cleaned the apartment, did a little carpentry on Monday.

She also did her laundry in the basement on Monday, but she did that in the morning. He had watched her taking her load of washing to the elevator that morning early before the hausfrau rush. So it was safe for him to go to the basement now, he thought, as he headed for the elevator. She would understand seeing him poking around in trash cans in the basement, but there was no need explaining more than was absolutely

necessary because time was of the essence.

Early each morning the janitor collected garbage and trash from outside each door, took it down to trash cans in the basement. A private sanitation company truck came around every afternoon and picked it up, but the truck had not yet arrived. There were plenty of empty wine bottles which Norman piled into a cardboard carton, and cigarette butts, enough to fill an empty paint can.

There were no ashtrays in his apartment. But the butts looked even better scattered around on chipped plates that he had found in the kitchenette cabinet when he had moved in. A few strewn about on the floor, smudged out on the window ledge added an even more authentic flavor.

He emptied the vase onto the coffee table. Two dollars and seventeen cents left. Enough for a bottle of Chianti. He ran into the hall toward the elevator. What would Ma think if she found out what he really did with the money he had left over after food and rent? Instead of painter's supplies, snacks and wine for beat generation idlers, and weird pictures, he spent most of his money going to movies. Sometimes he spent the entire day and most of the night in a 42nd Street movie.

He rode back up in the elevator hugging the bottle of reed-wrapped Chianti. It wasn't just the allow-

ance, he told himself, it really wasn't. She would be broken-hearted if she ever learned the truth, that he had no beatnik friends or any other kind, and that he had not as yet quite reached the point where he could start tapping his artistic gifts.

But he soon would start tapping those gifts. And that was why he knew this was not really a deceptive thing. It was only a question of time before his mother's faith in him, her sacrifice, was justified by his unsuspected talents startling the world. The timing was off, that was all. Her visit was just a little bit premature, so that this was not a deception, not a phony bit, a lie, but a preview. That was it, a preview of things to come!

Except for Betty. Betty was not going to be a preview, but the real attraction. Although actually it was premature with Betty too. This wasn't the time, but it would have to be now just the same, and Betty would understand. It wouldn't be as beautiful and perfect as it would have been in its own sweet time, but it had to be. Now or never. Because Ma would have to see Betty before she went back to Lakeville, Arkansas.

He had been talking and writing to her about Betty for months. Ma had wanted a picture so he had snapped a candid shot of Betty walking down the hallway. She had wanted a letter from Betty so he had typed out a letter and signed

Betty's name because the time simply hadn't been right yet to go any further.

Yet he knew, as he started down the hall toward 5-H, still carrying the bottle of wine, that it would be all right now, fine with Betty. Not perfect, not as ideal as it would have been if it had just happened during some unexpected but magic moment, but necessary and good just the same.

He hesitated with his hand near the buzzer of Betty's door. He realized that sweat was running down his cheeks. He put his face close to the black enamel door and his quick breath fogged the shining wood.

That sounded like Gordon McRae singing *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*.

His hand was trembling a little as it moved toward the buzzer, then jerked back. He rubbed his flat hand across his wet forehead.

For a moment he resented his mother coming in this way unexpectedly and too soon. It wasn't right yet. Sometimes when they passed one another in the hall, or rode up or down together on the elevator, he noticed the awareness of him in Betty's eyes. Not that they ever looked directly at one another. It was a more complex inner vibrating thing than that. Something intangible, indescribable, a togetherness without words, one of those once in a lifetime things.

Sometimes, in his apartment, he

stood listening, hearing the sound of her footsteps pausing almost imperceptibly just outside his door. Lying awake nights looking at her pictures on the wall he thought of her and he knew that at the same time she lay in her apartment thinking of him. It was something you knew. He knew that she, too, waited for the magic moment of admission.

His knees felt weak as he leaned against the wall beside the door. It shouldn't have to be now, or tomorrow, or any special time. It should go on silently, growing, building, and sometime, who knew when, it would become open and real to others, as real as it could be to others who didn't understand.

Ma, he whispered, why did you do it? Why didn't you wait?

He could hear the minutes ticking away and he could hear them getting louder inside his head. He looked at his watch. Five o'clock.

His hand slid up the wall and covered the buzzer. It seemed to take a long time for the sound of footsteps to approach the door.

The door opened a few inches. "Yes." He saw a line of red blouse, a tight plane of orange leotards, that cute little heart-shaped face with the pursed lips, the black hair covered with a scarf. "Yes?"

He pressed the Chianti into his stomach. His throat constricted. His lips moved wordlessly and for a terrible moment he was going to run, run in such a way that he knew he

would never stop. Then the word suddenly burst through his lips like a bubble.

"Betty—"

"Yes."

"Betty—hello, Betty."

"Hello." The door remained open only three inches. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in a minute, Betty?"

"What for?"

"I want to talk to you, Betty." He felt as if he had broken through a thick gellatinous wall. "May I talk to you now?"

"What about?"

"It's very important, terribly important."

"What's important about it? Now listen, who are you anyway?"

"Who am—why I—" he gestured vaguely down the hall.

"I didn't order any wine."

"What—?"

"You from the dellie?"

"Betty! Don't pretend you—why I'm Norman."

"Norman?"

"Your neighbor—down the hall—Norman Borden." But already he knew that there was something wrong, terribly wrong, or going wrong, and that he couldn't let it.

"Yes, so?"

"But don't you remember how—" His words choked off as he saw the frown and the door starting to close. "No, please!" He got his foot in the door and pressed his face into the crack. "Please listen to me a minute. I won't come in. Just listen."

"What's the matter with you anyway?"

"Will you listen a minute?"

"All right, but don't try anything or I'll start yelling."

"Don't do that. I—my mother's coming up here at six. She—I told her about you, Betty. You and I. And she wants to meet you. I told her you would be in my apartment and she's depending on that. She has my word. That's all, just be there for a while when she comes in. I'll introduce you, and then you can leave, Betty."

She shook her head slowly. "Go away," she finally said in a thin voice. "Go away."

"I know I'm rushing things, Betty. But this is an emergency. You've got to meet Ma. *You've got to meet Ma!*"

Now the door was open only an inch, and he could see only one of her dark round eyes. "Why do I have to meet Ma?"

"I've written her all about you. I've talked about you when she calls. She lives in Arkansas. I've told her about us, and just a while ago she called and she's here in the city and she insists on meeting you."

"What's this with us?"

"Betty," he whispered. "I've told her how we love each other, and she wants—"

Norman had heard the laughter before. Usually when he had been chased home from school by the other kids because he was smarter

than they were. But he didn't have the time nor the inclination to listen to it now.

"You've got to help me," he said, and pushed his way in though the door.

A blast of sound throbbed down the hallway as he opened the door of his apartment at six. A den of drunken laughter, screams, cool jazz, breaking glass.

"Come in, Ma!" Norman yelled above the dizzy sound, and pulled her inside as she gave a joyful little shriek and her flowered hat fell off.

She hugged and kissed him and peered over his shoulder through a whirl of cigarette smoke. Norman whirled her around.

"Meet the gang, Ma. Here they all are, the idle leeches, misfits, victims of failure and disillusionment. Here they are, Ma, the beats. This is Ma, in from the hills."

He swung her round the room through the smoke in a hopping dance. She shrieked again and half fell over the tape recorder.

She pushed Norman away and stood peering into the smoke. She screamed above the den. "Are you drunk? Norman—I don't see anyone."

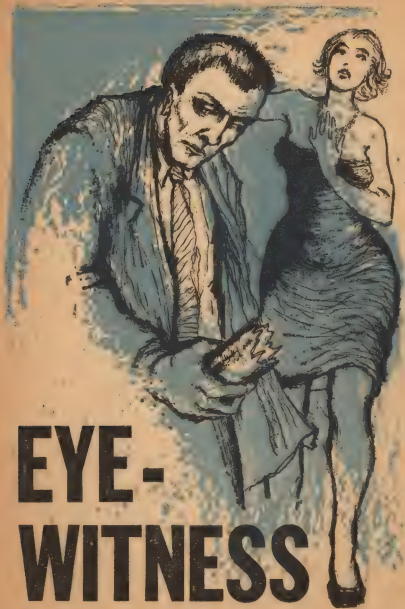
He dragged her toward the couch. "And here's Betty. Betty this is Ma."

"Why I'm so happy to meet you, Betty. I just—"

She jerked her hand back. Betty's face fell forward and her head hung at an impossible angle. Her face was a dark purple and her protruding tongue was the color of wet eggplant.

Mrs. Borden stood in the middle of the room with her eyes clenched shut and her mouth open, but the scream was buried under the rising sound as Norman turned up the volume on the tape recorder.





EYE- WITNESS

A GUY can spend a lifetime elbowing through throngs of people and still be lonely. Like a bum in a packed flophouse; or sharing a nigger-lipped butt with a dozen others in a nine-by-nine drunk tank; or sacking a park bench with another panhandler and getting a sweat-

stinking foot in the face every time he rolls over. Surrounded by humanity, yet all alone—a Daniel Boone of the concrete canyons.

I was that way until one good thing happened to me, just one—when I met Myra. She was a model with a thrill-loving zest for life

The eyewitness, the one who could save Fleers' wife from the gas chamber, was a pornographer, a smut photographer who had taken pictures through Fleers' own bedroom window.

BY CHARLES SLOAN



that sparked right out of her photos. She had been kept busy in front of the lens and behind it, with every guy in town after her. Only she married me, big footed, pug-ugly me. For eight weeks I felt like the sun had finally started shining. And then they took her away from me . . .

The squad room was throbbing with the city's aches and pains when I finished my last report of the day. I signed it—Detective Lieutenant David Fleers—and dropped it into a drawer. When I looked up, Captain Klegg was angled over my desk.

"Who're you taking with you on the Endze transfer tonight?" he demanded.

I snorted. "You know there's nobody available."

He started shaking his sparsely-haired round head. "You can't run that detail alone. Not when every gunbird in the streets may be waiting to transfer Endze to the morgue instead of the state pen."

I took out a cigarette and almost lit the filter tip. I was overworked and tired as Eddie Klegg and every other bull in the Third Precinct. Two months ago, on the day after my wedding, a twenty-year old mother and her baby had been run down during a robbery. Since we started the crackdown, I'd been pushing every man on the squad double-shift.

"I can't spare two men for a simple transfer," I said.

"Nothing's simple about getting killed. The syndicate can't chance Rudy Endze turning pigeon. Cartello could have you and Endze for the price of one executioner."

I shook my head. "Cartello's not that dumb."

Chris Cartello was the top slice off the local cheese, boss of Circle Bay's crime organization. After a month of our cleanup, I'd received an "anonymous" phone call:

Pick up all the punks you want, Fleers, but stay out of my affairs. Or I'll yank the lid off something hot enough to blow you out of the department and clear out of town.

I ran as tough a squad as Captain Klegg would allow, and then some. I'd smacked around my share of punks, but I was clean. After the call, I cracked down all the harder.

I shook my head at Klegg again. "I don't think Cartello will try anything. If he does, I can take care of it."

Klegg sighed and rubbed a hand across his eyes. Muscle moved under his rolled sleeves. "When are you going to quit sweeping the gutters by yourself, Dave?"

I felt my jaw muscles bunch. We'd gone over all that too often for me to answer him, times when he'd told me to take it easy, leave a little for somebody else. I stood up, patted the holstered .38 clipped to my belt, and picked up my hat. "Is that all, Eddie?" I asked calmly. "I'd like to spend some time with my wife before I pick up Endze."

Klegg nodded. "Yeah, that's all." He gave me a tired smile. "Say hello to Myra for me."

They were waiting in my car.

Chris Cartello was on the passenger's side of the front seat. He was bland, handsome with a dark thinness, lips set beneath a delicate black mustache. He didn't resemble the public conception of a hood who lived off the profits of dope, prostitution, pornography, illegal booze—even hired killing. He was the good-looking executive surrounded by women at the country club dance. He flashed a mouthful of capped teeth at me. "Climb in, Lieutenant." He waved a magnanimous hand at the other side of my car.

The other two were in the back seat. One I didn't know, a scrawny cadaver with a massive forehead and the expensively-cut clothes of a gun-carrier. The other was Chris Cartello's brother, John, the syndicate's second-in-command. He was big, burly, with neither his brother's looks nor brains.

I climbed in behind the wheel. I reached across Chris Cartello and opened his door. "Get out. You're stinking up my car."

Cartello's mouth tightened. He yanked the door shut. "Don't push me, Fleers. You been a thumb up my nose for a long time now."

"I haven't even got a good start on you yet."

"You locked up eight of my runners in the past couple months.

You're costing me a lot of cash, Fleers."

"Don't break my heart."

He stuck a rigid finger under my nose. "I'll break more than that, wise guy. I told you a month ago I could stop you." He pulled the finger back and ran its tip along his mustache. "But I'm willing to do it an easier way. Give him the envelope, Johnny."

"Sure." John Cartello took a long, white package from his inside coat pocket, leaned forward and slid it across my shoulder. It dropped into my lap. "Live it up, copper," he said.

I looked at him in the rear-view mirror. His eyes bored into the nape of my neck with a cold, inbred loathing for anything connected with the law. But when they switched to his brother, they became greedy pig eyes. It was no secret that John Cartello wanted to run the organization—a job he would have if it wasn't for his brother.

I picked up the package.

"You've been working too hard, Lieutenant," Chris Cartello said. "There's enough money there for a second honeymoon for you and that sexy little bride of yours. Hell, if I had a broad like that, I'd be home chasing her all the time." He winked and jabbed me in the ribs with a thumb. "Those blonde fluffs are really hot stuff, huh, Fleers?"

Anger was suddenly tight across my temples, like a hangman's noose

that had slipped too high. I could feel it in my throat and knew I couldn't control my voice, even to tell him to take his hand off me. I held the bribe in my left hand. Slowly, so he could watch me, I spat on the envelope, twice, to get it just right. Then I swung around and slammed it into his face. It sounded like a flat hand slapping water.

In the mirror, I could see the startled faces of John Cartello and the cadaver. Their hands moved toward shoulder rigs. Right there in front of police headquarters, they would have gunned me, maybe gotten away with it. Only I was expecting it. I had my own gun pointed at Chris Cartello's stomach.

"Hold it!" I shouted. "I'll put lead in him, so help me."

John Cartello's eyes skipped to his brother in indecision. For a few seconds I wondered just how badly he coveted his brother's kingdom of crime. But the slight hesitation was enough. Their guns lowered.

Chris Cartello was dabbing at his face with a handkerchief. A little shiver ran through him. "You're playing games with the wrong guy, Fleers," he croaked hoarsely. "Now I'm gonna fix you."

My voice was steady now. That action had rinsed away the peak of my anger, but it held an edge like a jagged switch blade when I said, "I don't take bribes, you lousy punk. And don't mention my wife again with your filthy mouth."

"I'm gonna fix you." Cartello spoke absently, as though to a ghost he could no longer see nor hear. "I was gonna have somebody else take care of it, but now I'll do it myself. I'm gonna get you where it'll hurt most."

I leaned forward and pressed the tip of my gun against his belt buckle. "I hope you try, Cartello. I hope you try in person. Then I can do a blast job on you with everything legal."

His mouth whitened at the corners, but I didn't pride myself that it was fear. He stuffed his handkerchief away. He whipped the package of money off his lap with a vicious backhand. Climbing out of the car, he smoothed down his mustache and walked away. John Cartello and the cadaver started to follow.

"Hold it." I scooped the package off the floor and tossed it onto the back seat. "Take this crap with you."

John Cartello shrugged. He picked up the envelope.

I put my gun away and turned to face him. "You should have let me kill him. It would have made you a big man in the gutters, instead of a flunky."

He attempted a smile that never reached his eyes. "Maybe some other time, Fleers," he said and stepped outside.

I drove home, the wheel sticking to my sweaty hands. The Cartello boys always affected me that way.

I couldn't stand the kingpins, the hot-shots who think their feet don't stink. I despised everything about them, and I couldn't help myself.

Thirty-eight years ago, my old lady staggered into a slop joint on lower Third, for just one quick-one because of the March chill. As usual, she had more than one. Only this time her labor pains were just minutes apart. The bartender delivered me atop some beer cases in the storeroom. I was named after him.

They used to kid me about it, her and the old man. He was a two-bit pigeon who ended up wading the river with cement sneakers. Then the old lady hustled barfllys until her alcohol count blew off the top of her skull. I grew up in squalor, among drunks and whores and addicts and out-and-out tramps, fighting for corners to hawk papers and waking up putrid from my own blood in alleys, with the few cents I'd earned gone. It had a lot to do with what I became, with what Eddie Klegg often accused me of being—a compulsive lawman, a lonely cop who can't let up on the addicts and whores and drunks, or the pushers and hoods and killers who stomp a guy even when he can't be ground any farther into the dirt than he is already. Only I never thought of it that way. It was a search for something clean, just one infinitesimal thing in the world to make it all worth while.

When I found Myra, it was like a

drink of cool, fresh water that cleansed away the sour taste of my past, and of things like Cartello and his organization of filth.

As I pulled into my drive, I wondered how I was going to tell Myra about working tonight. This was the fourth time since I'd known her that I'd handled transfers myself. I wasn't in too big a hurry when I started into the house.

She was lying across the bed when I came out of the shower. As always, she had the ceiling lights, the dresser lights and the three-way lamps on either side of the double bed all switched on full. Even under that merciless glare, her complexion was soft and smooth. I knotted the towel about my waist. I let my eyes roam along her legs to the mound where the red silk robe whitened against the thrust of hip; up over her breasts to the slim oval of her face—pretending surprise that she was watching. I winked, but she wasn't having any.

I stuck fists on my hips. "I'll use a pillow."

She frowned. "What?"

"To cover your face," I said, "if it freezes like that."

"Bull," she said sullenly, but a sheepish half-grin curled the corners of her mouth.

She rolled over, facing the window on the far side of the room. A grass-carpeted, shrub-decorated patio with a louvered fence shielded

the window from all angles, letting us keep it open, the blinds up for the slightest draft, even while we dressed or slept. I watched the breeze finger Myra's blonde hair, felt again the shock that flickered through me when I was near her, that made me want to hold her, say,

Myra, Myra, I love you . . .

I reached out and touched her. She interlocked her fingers with mine, and pulled my arm across her body. "You promised we'd go out tonight," she said against my knuckles.

I sighed. "I know. I forgot about the Endze transfer."

"Every time you make a transfer, you're gone all night." She let go of my hand and rolled back, straining the thin robe. She propped her head on one arm. "We haven't been out together in six weeks."

"I know, Myra. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Dave. Just take me out. Let's have fun tonight, just us."

I gestured helplessly. "I can't. Not tonight."

She sighed, long, deeply. Her teeth nibbled her forefinger, like a small child lost in thought. I was thinking how nice it would be to kiss the wistfulness off her mouth when she swung erect on the bed, long thighs flashing, her full lips set in sudden resolution. "Dave, I want to model again."

It took me off guard. "You know how I feel about that. You said

you'd stop working when we got married."

She fluttered her long hair impatiently. "I have to do something. Dave, I've been so darn lonely!"

"I don't want men oggling you."

"But I had my picture taken hundreds of times before we were married! You weren't jealous. You thought it was all right then."

I shook my head. "I never thought it was all right. And I've been jealous of you ever since we met." I turned and began digging underclothes out of the dresser. "Besides, you're my wife now. That makes all the difference."

I knew how she felt. She had expected romantic adventure, like the night of our third date, four months ago. Pitch dark, a lonely street, the sudden impaling of a mugger and victim by my headlights. He blackjacked me twice before I got him. Myra's eyes had shone, stunned with the melodrama of a cop's life. She ran tender fingers over my bruised face, but I could feel her heart pounding with excitement.

I could have told her then that a cop's wife has little but empty, waiting hours, but I didn't. I needed her to shut away the lonely hours I'd spent myself, just being alive. And when you find someone as wonderful as Myra, you don't care how you get her, nor what you have to do to keep her.

Since our wedding, I'd been working seven days a week, coming

home late at night only for exhausted sleep. It was hard to realize I had something to do with my time besides pressuring the syndicate or the independent hoods, pounding at every case until I had the pieces shoveled behind bars. It was hard to remember that I was a husband now, too.

Myra's warm breast touched my arm. "Dave," she said softly, "couldn't someone else deliver that prisoner, just this once? It's important to me."

My heart hammered against my ribs and I half turned to pull her into my arms. Then I remembered Captain Klegg's words of caution in the squad bay that afternoon, and Cartello's threat as he sat in my car. I shook my head miserably. "If Cartello tries anything tonight, I should be the one to take care of it. I started the whole mess."

Her breath came hot, sharp against my back. She spun away, her negligee flying. "You don't have to spend every waking minute taking care of your job, do you?"

"Myra," I said helplessly, "don't . . ."

"I'm sick of sitting around this house alone all the time! I don't even know any of the neighbors, except to say hello."

"I know. I . . ."

She had her hands on her hips, her chest thrust out, and angry determination had squared the lines of her face. "Well, I'm going out tonight, with you or without you."

Her lips twisted. "But you can bet I won't be alone for long."

She was being carried away now, flinging bitter words that I knew she didn't mean, angry words spawned during the long nights she had spent alone. But that knowledge didn't ease the sting of what she said.

"Don't," I said tightly, reluctantly angry myself, now. "Don't talk like that."

"I can pick up a dozen men anytime I want them."

"Stop it, Myra!"

"And from all the satisfaction I've been getting out of you lately, I'd need a dozen men . . ."

I was on her. I knotted my fist in her hair, jerked her face up close to mine. Brutal pressure forced her head back, tightened the smooth skin of her throat, pulling her eyes into elongated slits. She gave a sharp cry of pain and raked her nails along my hand.

"If you so much as look at anyone else, I'll kill you." My voice was a choked rasp. "I swear I'll kill you!"

"Dave! Let go!"

"I lived with animals like that, women who put out to anything in pants—even my own mother!—just for a free drink or a sick thrill." I wrenched her head farther back. She moaned deep in her throat. "Don't ever say anything like that again! Don't even joke about it!"

I shoved her away and turned to lean on the dresser, exhausted. And I was suddenly ashamed. I waited

until my breathing was even. Without facing her, I said, "I'm sorry, Myra. I hadn't any right to do that. It's just I'm tired and on edge . . ."

Silence. My heart throbbed in panic.

. . . if I lost her . . . My God, if I lost her . . .

A sighing rustle of silk.

"Dave." Softly.

I turned.

The robe was froth at her feet. Her body was bold, glorious in the bright light. She offered her hand, led me to the bed, down, into the breeze from the window.

"I didn't mean it, Dave. I wanted to hurt you," she whispered contritely. "I was just afraid you didn't love me. You haven't told me for so long . . . love me . . . I love you . . ."

I stretched for the table lamps, but she pulled me back. Her lips were swollen, ripe in the bright pool of radiance. Here eyes held the same emerald gleam of excitement I'd seen on the night of the mugger.

"You know I like lights when you love me." She smiled wickedly, impishly. "Lots and lots of lights . . ."

I used my own car for the transfer. I cuffed Endze to the U bolt I have welded below the dash. It let me keep both eyes on the road. The trip normally took three hours, but this time I made a stop.

Rudy Endze was a convicted

dope peddler. If he talked before Cartello got to him with a bribe or a bullet, I might have a wedge into the syndicate. I picked a deserted country road and cut the lights.

Endze was a half head over my six foot, solid. He broke the silence of the night only once, a groan hardly loud enough to drown out the chirp of the crickets. I was methodical, careful about bruises. The bracelets kept him from resisting.

Finally, defeated, I started the motor. I lit two cigarettes with the dash lighter, stuck one into Endze's mouth.

I watched him suck hungrily at the butt. "One thing about you, Endze," I said, "you can take it."

He looked at me with pain-ridden, heavy-lidded eyes. "We'll see how good you are, Fleers, when Cartello gets through with you."

Even in the dark, my face must have scared him. He wriggled against the far door. "You'll never get anything out of me, Fleers," he said quickly.

I uncurled my fists and jerked the cigarette out of his mouth. I threw both butts out of the window, and got the car off the berm onto the road.

For all my bravado with Eddie Klegg that afternoon, I breathed easier when I passed through the gates of the big cage. There had been no sign of Cartello or even a syndicate gun. Cartello might be going to try to take me, but evident-

ly tonight was not the night. There was a touch of impatient anger, too, that nothing had happened. Someone else could have convoyed Endze. It had even been wasted time trying to get anything out of him. I could have been with Myra. And laying over at the prison until morning suddenly seemed like a stupid waste of time. By driving hard, I could be home by 1:00 A.M.

Only I got behind a lot of night-rolling trucks. Between that and the stop I'd made, I didn't make it until two o'clock.

I had to park at the curb because my driveway was filled with police cars.

I sat behind the wheel and took in the patrol cruisers, the house with every window aspew with light, the uniformed men glimpsed now and again behind them. I got weak. It hit me suddenly, like the smash of a nightstick across my brain.

I'm gonna fix you, Fleers. I'm gonna get you where it hurts the most.

The trouble was, I'd always been alone. I'd never had anyone to protect except myself. When I was threatened, it was a personal thing that I took care of when the time came.

Now there was Myra.

Her name was a breath in my throat. "If he's hurt her . . ."

I scudded from the car, sprinted across the lawn.

"Hold it, buddy!" A light swept my face. "Oh!" The voice was confused now. "Lieutenant Fleers . . ."

"What happened?"

"There's been a killing. I mean, your wife . . ."

I bolted past him to the door, flung it wide. The place was jammed with cops. Every eye turned toward me. The room became still as the sigh of a corpse. I sorted the faces, picked out Klegg's just as he started toward me.

"Where's Myra?" I demanded.

Klegg grunted. "She's okay. For now, at least."

My legs went limp. I dropped onto a hallway chair.

"What happened, Eddie?"

He said it quickly, bluntly. "Chris Cartello is dead. It looks as though Myra shot him."

I stared up at him. Finally, I worked a cigarette out of my pocket and into my mouth. Klegg had to hold the match. I almost gagged on the smoke. "Where's Myra?" I asked again.

"In the kitchen with a doctor. But I want you to see this first." He turned and walked across the living room. I followed him. It was like wandering through a twisted copy of my home by Salvador Dali, with surrealist policemen and equipment scattered bent and askew over the furniture. It couldn't be real. Not murder . . . not here . . .

There were clothes on the floor of the bedroom, a man's crumpled

suit and the red negligee Myra had worn earlier tonight. A sheet-covered form sprawled half-on, half-off the double bed. The sheet didn't conceal the blood spattered on the spread, nor the pool that had gathered on the floor. Klegg walked over, grasped a corner of the sheet, glanced at me. I nodded.

It was Chris Cartello. He wasn't handsome anymore, not at all the lady's man. His nearly pupil-less eyes stared up at the intersection of wall and ceiling because of the odd angle that his head hung over the edge of the bed. The only thing he wore was a generous coating of his own blood. His chest, stomach and face were punctured with bullet holes.

Klegg dropped the sheet. I walked to the dresser and ground out my cigarette in an ashtray. I had seen dead bodies from one end of the city to the other, in alleys, bloated in bathtubs, in automobiles, even the pieces of one stuffed behind the altar of a church. But none had given me the sick revulsion of this one on my own bed. On Myra's bed. Our bed.

"Tell me, Eddie," I said thickly.

He nodded. "I'll tell it the way it happened to me, so you'll know I was only doing what was necessary," he said carefully.

"Just tell the goddamn story!"

"Yeah. We got a squeal at 12:35. A woman, unknown at the time."

"What do you mean, 'At the time'?"

"I'll get to that. The woman witnessed a murder. At this address—your's. I tried getting you at the prison, but you'd already gone and you weren't driving a radio car. We found Cartello just like this, nude, six .32 slugs in him. Myra was packing a suitcase. She was half-dressed and completely hysterical."

"What the hell did you expect?"

Klegg raised his eyebrows, shrugged.

I asked the next question with my throat tight, hating Klegg for making me ask. "Did the witness say who shot him?"

"I don't know. She didn't give her name until she turned up at the D.A.'s office. She's there now, and I haven't heard anything more."

"Then why does it look like Myra killed him?"

He made this one blunt, too. "We found the murder weapon on the floor. Myra's were the only prints on it."

I stared at him, waiting for him to burst out laughing, tell me this was a horrible, monumental joke rigged up with Myra because I'd left her tonight. But I knew it wasn't. Not with Chris Cartello's blood soaking my carpet.

I sucked in a long breath. "Let me see Myra."

"Go ahead."

I stopped at the door and turned back. "Who's the witness, Eddie?"

"Amanda Evans," Klegg said. "She says she was Chris Cartello's girl friend."

When I entered the kitchen, Myra gave a small whimper and jumped up from her chair at the table. I held her. It was a long time before she stopped crying. The doctor poured two cups of steaming coffee and set them on the table.

"You're the best medicine right now," he said. "Get her to drink this."

He left us alone.

I got her back to the table and had her drain both cups. I refilled them and kept one for myself. I scraped my chair around next to hers. "I've got to know, Myra."

She shook her head violently. "I can't! I've told it so many times!"

I cursed Klegg under my breath. I pulled her gently toward me. "Once more, Myra. Please."

She looked at me for a long time and then nodded. She squeezed her eyes shut and tears ran out beneath the lids. "Just so you believe me, that's all."

"Everyone believes you."

"No. Not the others."

"I'll believe you, Myra. I know you. I love you."

She hugged my hand to her breast, touched my lips with her fingertips. "That's the only hope I have," she said.

She told the story quickly, biting her lip to recall things she must have wanted to blot away forever . . . a bath . . . getting into her robe . . . a noise from the patio . . . when she turned, he was already through the window.

"He said he'd choke me if I screamed," she said, her eyes tightly closed. "He . . . oh, Dave! . . . he tore off my robe . . . pushed me onto the bed. I was so frightened! I couldn't move. He took off his clothes and he . . . tried to . . . he climbed onto the bed . . ."

Myra's eyes flew open. "That's when he was shot. From the window. Terrible, loud explosions. I screamed. A gun came flying through the window. It hit me and I grabbed it and threw it on the floor . . . and . . . and that's all. He almost fell off the bed and blood was all over everything. Dave, hold me!"

I tried to soothe her. Once she had finished, I never wanted her to go through it again. But I had to know.

"Who was at the window, Myra?"

She shook her head. "I had all the lights on in the room. It was hard to see anything outside. I heard someone run across the patio. I went to the front room window, just as a man climbed into a car at the curb and drove away."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"No." Her forehead wrinkled. She looked at me, as though unsure of something. I held her away from me.

"What else, Myra?"

"I . . . noticed another car parked in our drive. Another man ran from the direction of our patio—right after the first car drove away

—and got into the second car and drove away."

"Did you recognize him?"

"He was just a shadow, but . . ." She frowned again.

"But what?"

"I think he was carrying a camera."

A camera. Was that Cartello's threat—obscene pictures of Myra to use against me? It was fantastic, but no more so than the way it had backfired on him. If I had given in, to protect Myra, Cartello would have finally been rid of me. If I hadn't knuckled under—if I had let him distribute the pictures for stags and smokers—letting me keep my badge would have been like giving me a legal license to kill Cartello. The D.A., the commissioner—they wouldn't have held onto me with lead-lined gloves.

I stayed with Myra after they booked her. She felt better when daylight flooded her cell. A sun shaft hazed the edges of her hair, forming a fuzzed frame of gold about her face. I kissed her swollen eyes.

"I love you, Myra."

She tightened her arms about my neck and kissed me with a desperate eagerness. "Help me, Dave. No matter what happens, what they say about me, just love me . . ."

"I'll always love you," I whispered.

Klegg tried to persuade me to

turn over the case to someone not emotionally involved, but I shook him off. He finally gave me every man he could spare. We came up with nothing.

I put most of the pressure on the one man who had profited most by Chris Cartello's death—the new boss of the syndicate, John Cartello. We couldn't shake his alibi for the night of the murder. A dozen witnesses were ready to swear that John Cartello had never left his newly-inherited nightclub, The King's Room. The witnesses were all employees of the club.

The trial was brief, deadly, a walk-away for the prosecution. Bartenders, taxi drivers, waitresses—people easily bought by John Cartello—testified that Myra and Chris Cartello had been a cozy couple all over town for the past six weeks. They even had testimony from the clerk who made up the duty roster for our squad, testimony that showed I had been on double-duty for two months, making it easy enough for Myra to play around without my knowing it. But the most damaging evidence came from Chris Cartello's girl friend, Amanda Evans, the woman who had reported the shooting.

You are employed at The King's Room, Miss Evans?

Yes. I'm a song-stylist.

Christopher Cartello hired you?

That's right. Four weeks ago.

In only four weeks, you fell in love with him?

Yes. With each other.

Did he have that effect on other women? Was he handsome, charming enough to persuade a woman to have an affair with him—even a married woman?

Objection!

Sustained.

Were you with Christopher Cartello on the night of the murder?

Yes.

Tell us about it.

Well, when I first started at the club, Chris had been seeing another woman. When Chris and I realized we were in love, he told her but she wouldn't listen to him. Finally, Chris decided to go to her home and have it out with her. I went with him, waited in the car. I heard shots inside the house. I ran to a window. I saw her standing beside a bed holding a gun. Chris was bleeding . . .

They were both unclothed?

Yes. She . . . probably forced him to undress at gun point, to shame him. She was like that!

Objection!

She killed him rather than give him up!

Objection, your honor!

Sustained. The witness will confine herself to the questions.

The woman you saw holding the gun over Christopher Cartello's body—is she in this room?

The court will note she indicates the accused, Mrs. Myra Fleers.

Myra told her story, just as she had told it to me. Myra, built for the excitement she aroused in men, with a body that had made her a top model—a body that caused almost instant resentment among women, like seven of the jurists the prosecution had managed to empanel.

Myra was sentenced to die in the gas chamber.

The cell was bleak, uninviting as the bed of a coffin. Myra sat on the edge of the cot, her eyes withdrawn, hands clenched, her mouth restrained in mute, incredulous horror.

"I didn't kill him," she murmured thinly.

I took her hands. I almost recoiled from the slick, icy touch of her flesh. I wanted to pull her into my arms, warm her, but her body was unyielding. I kissed her. Her mouth was cold as the lips of the dead. Holding her, suddenly, unbearably, it was like embracing a corpse, her afterbreath tainted with the odor of the grave.

I sank to my knees, my face buried in her lap like the child I felt, and, God help me, my terror was not alone for her. I had been lonely before, but if they took her away from me now, I would be a dead man walking.

She bent above me, capping my head with soft breasts. She rocked, holding me, and she said, "I really didn't love him. They lied."

. . . over and over and again . . .

The King's Room was aroar with party. I stood on the dais overlooking the sunken lounge until I found him in the crowd. He was taller than anyone around him, the punks and hoods, the behind-kissers that always gathered around scum like John Cartello, like pus encircling a sore. His head was thrown back in laughter.

Amanda Evans was no longer just a hired singer. She clutched Cartello's arms as though she had written the nine-points law. She was dressed in a black sheath, not at all the garb of a mourning lover. Her eyelids drooped over the alcoholic sheen in her eyes. I'd checked her, but found nothing I could have used in court—just enough to convince me she had lied. She was a small time road canary with unknown combos, and even those jobs she got more on the strength of her back than her voice; a bed hopper who bounced on any mattress stuffed with enough money; the sort who would commit perjury for the right price; a slut with no right to speak my wife's name.

I stood looking down at them, feeling my anger build. Anger that Myra was locked in a cell because of the word of a whore; anger that Myra was to die while vermin such as this still collected like dross on a cesspool; anger that I had let it be so.

I went down three carpeted steps

and toward them. The crowd parted, became silent as some of them recognized me, whispered to others. Cartello turned, frowning.

"Hey, now!" His thick lips gashed open. "The prize fuzz of the Third Precinct! Greetings, Lieutenant."

"I want to talk, Cartello," I said. "Alone."

"Go to hell! Unless you got a warrant, you got no right here. I sure didn't invite you."

Amanda Evans tugged at his arm. "Hey, lover, don't holler on him. He's got enough troubles." She gave me the coy leer of a coquettish drunk.

Cartello guffawed. "Ain't it the truth?" He scooped a glass from a waiter's tray. He shoved it at me. I took it with reflex action. "Well, Johnny Cartello can let bygones be bygones. Welcome to the party, boy scout."

Amanda Evans lurched forward, her square bodice dipping as she clinked her glass against mine. "Here's to that pudgy little wife of yours." She looked up into my eyes and I wondered if she could see the hate welling in me, like smoke in a glass tube. "Long may she live!" She hiccupped.

"Yeah!" Cartello roared. "As long as they let her, anyway. Drink up, Fleers. This is a celebration. The law put the kibosh on my brother's killer today."

I threw the drink with the same reflexive action I had used to take

it. Liquor splashed across Amanda Evans' cleavage. She screeched as the ice cubes slid between her breasts. I still gripped the glass. I swung it in a backhanded arc toward Cartello's face. It shattered against the side of his head and the shard in my hand sliced across his upper lip.

Motion, as Cartello's goons started toward me, the cadaver with the wide forehead in the lead. My shoulder took Cartello in his stomach while he still had his hand up to his slashed lip. He went over and down with me astride his chest. The muscle boys kept coming. I had my gun out but even that didn't stop them. They knew as well as I did that I couldn't take them all. Cartello rolled and bucked beneath me. From behind, someone took hold of my hair and throat.

I shoved the barrel of my .38 into Cartello's mouth. I could feel parts of his teeth snap away and the gun sight gouge his tongue.

I let pressure whiten my finger on the trigger.

Cartello became very still. He went cross-eyed trying to look at the gun and my face at the same time. Beads of moisture spotted his face.

The hands let go of my throat.

"That's right, boys," I said quietly. "Just take your goddamn hands off me."

Slowly, I pulled the gun from Cartello's mouth. The metal was

slimy with spit and blood. I kept the muzzle about an inch from the tip of his nose. I said, "Tell them to line up across the room."

He tried to keep his eyes on the gun and motion with them at the same time. It didn't work. He spit blood and ivory chips and choked, "Do it!"

Everybody went away.

I tapped Cartello's nose with the gun. "Tell me about it, Cartello."

"A . . . about what?"

"About how you killed your brother."

"No! No, I didn't . . ."

He was lying beside pieces of the whiskey glass I had thrown. I took hold of his jaw and rocked his head sideways and down, grinding it against the floor. When I let his head swing back, his cheek was raw, with broken glass embedded.

"Tell me," I repeated.

He shook his head, his eyes and lips alive, dancing with pain. "I didn't. I tell . . ."

I gave him the gun, hard, against his bloody cheek, driving the glass deeper. His mouth came open in a silent shriek of anguish that couldn't get past the vomit in his throat. His sickness gushed out and mixed with blood and glass and teeth on the floor.

When I asked him again, he gave the right answer.

"Okay! I . . . killed him."

I tried to keep the surge of exhilaration and relief out of my voice. "Let's hear it."

Cartello tried to clear his throat. He spit some of the mess onto the floor and swallowed the rest. Then he told me.

Chris Cartello had been working for six weeks on a plan to fritz me—I knew what that was: the black-mail photos of Myra—and John Cartello suddenly had a foolproof way to take over the syndicate. He followed Chris, shot him through the window of my bedroom while wearing gloves. He hit Myra with the empty gun so she would pick it up, cover it with her fingerprints. He ran, got Amanda Evans to call headquarters and report the shooting. He paid for her false testimony to the District Attorney and later at the trial; testimony that put Myra on a non-stop trip to the gas chamber and set John Cartello up in business.

I sat on his chest and listened. When he finished, I hit him again with the gun. This time, the pain put him completely out. I phoned headquarters, keeping my gun on Cartello. Nobody tried to stop me. Nobody said a word.

But Captain Eddie Klegg had plenty to say. He stood braced in front of me as I sat on a barstool, his fists wedged into his sides, and roared, "What's next with you, Fleers? Judge, jury—you going to buy some cyanide and start your own gas chamber, too?"

I took a deep drag on my cigarette and snorted smoke. "I did

more in a half hour than the whole force accomplished since the murder. I got the killer's confession."

"You think it will stand up in court?"

"He admitted the killing. Before witnesses."

"Witnesses! Gunsels, whores and hoods, you mean. Everyone here is on syndicate payroll."

"How about the hired help? And the freeloaders? There's bound to be one honest one among them."

Klegg's mouth came open, as though he had so many things to say he didn't know where to start. He spread his hands helplessly. "The only thing they'll testify to is that you beat John Cartello with a gun."

"You know his confession is true."

"No. I don't. And you don't either. Not now. What would you have done with a crazy man beating your face to a pulp?"

"I'd have told the truth," I said, but I couldn't bring my eyes up to Klegg's. I dropped my cigarette into a glass of whiskey.

"You'd have admitted anything to save yourself," Klegg said.

"Everything he said checks out," I insisted.

Klegg sighed. He walked around and sat on the stool beside me. He shoved the whiskey glass away with a grimace. "I should have kept you off the case, like I wanted to in the first place."

"That's easy for you to say. What

the hell does Myra mean to you?" I was sorry even as the words came out, but I couldn't stop them.

Klegg's face grew taut and then as quickly relaxed into the features of a tired old man. "That's what I mean," he said sadly. "You don't even know what you're saying, let alone doing, or you'd never have pulled this clown act."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, Eddie."

"Don't be sorry for me, Dave." Klegg swung around to face me. "Besides getting yourself busted, you may have used up Myra's last chance."

On the day Myra was transferred to the state pen, Cartello's lawyers forced my hearing. I got off with indefinite suspension and bust to harness bull. Klegg was right about one other thing, too. Unless I could get proof that Cartello's confession was true, it looked as though I had used up Myra's only chance.

I had to find the eyewitness, the man Myra had seen run from the patio carrying a camera. If Chris Cartello had been planning to use pictures of Myra against me, he would have had to use someone he could trust, yet someone capable of getting the kind of shots he would need. One man filled that bill—the photographer the syndicate used in their million dollar pornography business. I didn't know him, couldn't even be sure that he would be the eyewitness Myra had seen. But

it was a fresh start. The only one I had.

I hit the ears and the stoolies: I wanted contact with the syndicate's smut man.

Two weeks without word—at home without even the activity of the squad room to occupy my mind. I lay in the dark, and sucked smoke deep and thought:

This is a cop. Your mother hustled and your father was a punk. So you pushed too hard at anything that reminded you of them, even the wheels and the kingpins. And now you're up to your chin in your own crap and somebody's making waves. If Myra dies, it will be you who pushed the pellet down the chute, and her time is growing shorter.

I rolled off the couch. I scooped my gun off the coffee table, shouldered into my coat, left the house. I had to find that eyewitness.

I grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt and jacket and rammed Jebbo Williams into the wall. No one paid any attention but the barkeep and when he got a look at my face, he walked to the opposite end of the bar and poured himself another stiff one. The little stoolie let his eyes float around in their own blood until they were aimed up at me.

"Why am I being hung up, Jebbo?" I asked. I twisted the shirt, squeezing the folds of skin on his neck, shutting off his wind. "Why

has everybody clammed up about the smut man?"

He bobbed his head frantically. I eased up.

"We . . . we got orders! Not to give you anything. Me, I don't know the guy, anyway."

"Find out."

He shook his head so hard that spittle flew off the corners of his mouth. "I even mention it, I'm fish food. Anyhow, the eyrie's got it the smut man ain't around no more."

My hands grew cold. "Dead?"

"More like hidin' out. If you want him, the organization's got to put the blast on him, right? So he turtles."

It made sense. And if they were that eager to keep him away from me, it could mean I was on the right track. I let go of Jebbo Williams and stepped back. I left him heaped on the floor like dirt never swept up.

My beard was already three days old and my mouth was thick from the taste of whiskey and cigarette smoke washed down with black coffee, so my breath must have smelled just right. I wore rags that didn't fit. I headed into the back alleys and clip joints, the brothels and the fleabags, among the type of places where I was born and grew up—a wino with kicks for dirty pics. It was like sinking into a quagmire.

I studied the cards passed from hand to hand, obscene photos im-

printed on decks of playing cards. I watched movies on screens of soiled sheets until I began to know their categories: "doubles", "three-ways", "frenchies", "mob scenes"; began to recognize the same thin plots even at the first framed segments: "the doctor and nurse", "the milkman", "the sex circus", "the baby sitter", "a day on the farm". I thumbed through "comic" books and illustrated "novels", even helped a dirty, whiskered old man assemble a picture puzzle of distorted lust. I watched and listened and I came up with a face repeated often in the pictures, a mulatto named Arlene Hutton.

I first saw her in a crowded room polluted with smoke and sweat and the fumes of cheap booze. I sat on an upended beer case, my hands gripping my thighs in revulsion that passed for the wet-palmed grips of lust the others had on their wine bottles.

A big shouldered gorilla sat beside me, his lips wet with anticipation as the picture leaped against the cracked plaster of the wall. It was a "black and white special", involving a white man and a sooty-skinned mulatto. The girl was young, no more than twenty-two, her features snub and pert. Her figure was full and dusky against the white backdrop of the bed, beside the man.

The ape prodded me with an elbow. "Boy, how'd ya like some'a that?"

The girl's popularity was evident by the number of productions she "starred" in. If anyone would know the syndicate's smut man, it would be Arlene Hutton.

It took me another three weeks to find her, while Myra's execution drew nearer and panic began to grip me.

We ended up half drunk in her apartment. I was shaved, scrubbed and suited. Arlene Hutton grew out of her low-cut white dress like a cocoa-toned Venus.

"You been a bash, man," she said throatily. She pushed away from the door and let her weight hang against me. "Let's take it together." She ground lips and body into mine. My flesh crawled. I stepped away. She opened her eyes, frowning.

"How do I know I can afford it?" I asked.

She put her hands behind her back. Seconds later, she stood clad in white panties and spike-heeled shoes, her dress trailing from her arm like a matador's cape in the dust. "Man," she gurgled, "can you afford not to?"

The only light spilled through the window from the neon-lighted city outside. It was enough for me to recognize the body with which I had become so familiar during the last few months. She posed, dusky skin accented by the white scanties, and gurgled again. "I better fix you a cold drink, big man." She hip-strutted away.

By the time she got back, I was

on the couch with my deck of cards spread across the top of the coffee table. She handed me my drink and turned, breasts swaying, to stare down at her own image repeated over a half-hundred times in the obscene cards.

"I want to make sure I get my money's worth," I said. "Pick a card, any card."

She took a long pull at her drink. "So that's how you knew me. What do you think of them?"

I watched her face in the neon glow. "They're professional, all right," I said carefully. "Who's the shutterbug?"

She gave me her body in profile as she drained her glass. "A syndicate photographer. He uses me for all his best ideas. And he pays top dollar."

She set her glass down among the cards. She came down onto my lap. "But then I always throw myself into my work, big man. You'll see."

Her lips and hands, her whole body began touching me, caressing . . . age-old arts I had seen her use in movies, in the cards strewn on the table, ways of prostitutes the world over, things my mother must have done . . .

I flung her away, scoured at my lips with my hand to erase a taint that steel wool wouldn't remove. She sprawled on her back across the low coffee table, legs akimbo in mimic of the foul pictures scattered around and under her. Alcohol and

anger mixed within me. I had the illusion of Arlene Hutton spiraling away, swelling back, laughing, flaunting her naked body, her hands seeking me with carnal urgency . . . while Myra waited to die . . .

I leaned over Arlene Hutton, one knee on the table between her legs.

"What . . . what is this?" she whimpered. "I thought you wanted to . . ."

"The only thing I want from you is the name of the man who created this filth." I swept the cards away. They flew, fluttered, demons from the mind of a madman.

Her eyes darted from my face to the butt of the gun that hung beneath my coat. "Are . . . you a vice dick?"

I took hold of her naked shoulders and pulled her face close to mine. I told her who I was. I told her what I wanted. If Myra died because I couldn't find that eyewitness, I swore that Arlene Hutton would die, too, the way any woman deserved to die who sold herself, gave herself like a dog in heat. She hung from my fists. I shook her, whipping her head back and forth, until fear was a liquid thing spilling out of her eyes. Her lips moved in spasms and I had to strain to hear when she whispered,

"Kopecchi . . . his name . . . Harold Kopecchi . . ."

I let her fall back onto the table and stood up. I was half-turned when the blow came. I twisted

enough to see the scrawny cadaver with the massive forehead—the bodyguard who had accompanied Chris and John Cartello when they attempted to bribe me. And beyond, the apartment door I had never locked.

He swung the butt of a .45. It took me behind the ear with the seeming force of a paper bag inflated with air, but it drove me forward into darkness. I felt only the soft cushion of Arlene Hutton's body as my face fell against her.

I woke up looking into Captain Klegg's face. I saw Arlene Hutton's face, too, as they carried her out on a stretcher. Her pug nose had been splintered and one closed eye had a sagging, hollow look. She was unconscious, her breathing forced. If the desk clerk hadn't heard her one muffled scream, she would have been dead.

I told Klegg what had happened, but an APB got nothing. They locked me up for assault, and I think Klegg half believed it. I could see him remembering what I had done to John Cartello.

John Cartello . . . trying to frame me for murder, just as he had framed Myra . . .

Arlene Hutton lasted for a long time. Three days before Myra's scheduled execution—when my sanity hung thin—Arlene Hutton regained consciousness long enough to free me. She died choking for air between stitched and swollen lips.

It had been too much for the D.A., the commissioner, some of the council. I was free, but my services were no longer needed on the police force.

I had told Klegg about Harold Kopecchi. He had dug up a mug shot on the photographer from an old extortion rap. An AFB had been posted when I was first booked—with no results.

When I walked out of the station, I was alone and without a badge. But I still had my gun and the mug shot of Kopecchi, with 54 hours to do what an entire police force had been unable to do in months—find an eyewitness to substantiate John Cartello's confession of murder. Two days and six hours to save Myra from the gas chamber.

Kopecchi's studio was set four steps below street level. The door was locked. Inside, framed portraits hung on walls and stood on shelving and counters, still and dusty. I could feel empty hysteria squeeze at my insides. I tried the door again, rattling the knob, throwing my shoulder against it and shouting, "Kopecchi!", again and again.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the door and waited for my weakness and panic to drain away. I went up onto the sidewalk and walked away. If I hadn't started moving, I might have screamed. I'd checked the directory. The studio was the only address listed.

But I had to find him. I had to find Harold Kopecchi.

I went through the shop that night. Bottles, trays, a few other things were scattered about the darkroom, as though Kopecchi had left in a hurry, taking only a few important items with him. Nothing else. Not one thing to assure me I had even a dead man's chance in the sun to save Myra.

O God! Myra! Myra . . . Myra . . .

My hands began to shake and I was sick in the bathroom before I left.

After a while, I moved in a daze, stopping only for the stinging impetus of alcohol, not daring to check the time, aware only that seconds were ticking away.

I showed Kopecchi's picture to taxi drivers, bus drivers, at railroads and airports, in restaurants and flophouses, in barrooms and stores, until I began to scream at the shaking heads with the uncaring faces, *my wife is going to die, goddamn it, can't you understand, they're going to kill her, I've got to find this man . . .*

9:00 P.M.

In five hours, Myra would die.

I stood at a bar. A terrible lethargy of failure and despair numbed my muscles until I could barely lift my glass. Myra was going to die and I was dying with her. My dying tasted of hate, hate that began a long time ago with my birth, a

hell-flame fed by my mother and father, by Cartello and Amanda Evans, by Arlene Hutton, who died the way she had lived, her body outraged even in death. Only now the hell-flame flickered, because Myra was dying, the one good, sweet taste of life I had ever had.

I ordered another drink. I paid no attention when the barroom door opened; paid less attention to the man who entered and began staring at me while he nursed a beer. He walked up beside me and brushed my arm. I shook him off, snarled, "Get the hell away."

"Okay, buddy. It's just I thought I knew you."

I took in his gorilla's build and flat face, the ape who had sat beside me in some smoke-filled sty on the night I had first seen Arlene Hutton in a stag film. "I've never seen you before," I lied. I lifted my glass and threw the whiskey down my throat. "Just leave me alone."

He snapped his fingers. "Hey! Yeah, I saw you at some stags once. You remember me—Joey Phipps?" He hauled his glass along the bar until our shoulders touched. He dug under his leather jacket and came out with a handful of wallet sized pictures.

"You look sicker than a dog throwin' up into the wind." He nudged me. "Just throw a gander at these, buddy. They'll put the oyster juice back in ya." We were alone at the end of the bar. He fanned the pictures out before me.

My eyes moved automatically over the corruption. I raised my hand to push them away—and stopped, my eyes riveted to a picture of a woman facing away from the camera, the hands of an unseen man reaching for her. The woman was nude, with only her back showing as she knelt on a bed. But I knew her. God, I knew her! It was Myra, my Myra, in our bedroom where Chris Cartello had been shot to death. I snatched up the picture and dug my fingers into the gorilla's arm.

"Where did you get this?"

"Hey, man, leggo the limb!"

"Where did you get this picture, damn you!"

"Ouch! Man, if it works you up like that, it's yours! I don't like it, anyway." He jerked away and rubbed indignantly at his arm. "I got this set off a little guy, comes in here about once a week."

"When? What night?"

"Lemme see . . . yeah, tonight. He should be in tonight. Ten, eleven, usually."

I held my breath, dug into my pocket for the dog-eared mug shot of Harold Kopechki. "Is this the man?"

"Yeah, that's him! Man, he's always got some hot ones."

"Do . . . you know where he lives?"

"Nope. Ran into him by accident, right here. Lucky, huh?" He gulped the last of his beer, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and nudged

me again. "Look, pal, I can't stay tonight. If the little guy's got something special, get me some, too, okay? I'll make it good with ya." He scooped his pictures off the bar. He tapped the picture of Myra that I still held. "You keep that one, but don't forget, huh?" He winked. "Keep zippered up, buddy," he said and left.

9:45 P.M.

Myra was to die at 2:00 A.M.

He arrived at 11:10, a little man with searching eyes that took in everything in the room, like miniature cameras. He nodded to the bartender and walked to a back booth with high wooden wings. He carried a crinkled-leather brief case with a tiny lock snapped through the hasp. He laid it down and slid out of sight into the booth. The bartender went across the room with a bottle of beer and a glass on a tray. I followed him. He put down the load and I dropped a bill onto the tray.

"Take it out of there," I said, "and keep yourself and the change away from here."

When he'd gone, I sat down across from Kopechki. He lit a cigarette with a kitchen match and watched while I tilted his bottle and let beer foam into his glass.

"Joey Phipps says you got the real stuff," I said.

"Ah!" His eyes crinkled at the name. "You want to buy some pictures, my friend?" He tapped the

brief case with a dirty-nailed finger. "I have the best, sir."

I dropped the picture in front of him, the shot Joey Phipps had given me. "I want some more like this, Kopechki. Of Myra Fleers and Chris Cartello."

His face went white and he had a lot of difficulty swallowing the mouthful of beer he had just taken. Carefully, he set down his glass. His eyes angled up from the picture until he was looking at me from under raised brows. It was hard to believe that so much white could show around an eye without its popping out of the socket. He tried to scramble out of the booth. I gripped the edges of the table and swung around beside him, knocking him back against the wall. I had my gun out for him to see. He put his hand against the muzzle.

"Don't," he said. "Please."

"I want information, Kopechki."

He was fascinated by the gun. It took a while for my words to penetrate. "Information? You're not from John Cartello?"

I pointed at the picture beside the beer bottle. "That woman is my wife. She's supposed to die tonight because of John Cartello."

"You're not going to kill me?" He squeaked it out, like a mouse that just avoided a snapping trap. He tugged out a handkerchief and wiped his face on one clean corner. "What do you want?"

"Did you see Chris Cartello die?"

He studied me warily, gave a feeble nod.

I wagged the gun. "Don't make me dig it out of you. I haven't got time. Who shot him?"

"I thought your wife . . ."

I punched his gut with the gun. "John Cartello!" he blurted. "I saw John Cartello kill his brother." He wiped his face again. "I was taking pictures through the window. There was plenty of light. The woman had every light in the room on . . ."

I wasn't paying the least attention. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. I wanted to kiss Kopecchi's feet. Hell, I wanted to kiss his behind!

I had an eyewitness! Myra was free!

I glanced at the barroom clock. 11:45. I could spare another hour and a quarter before I called Klegg to have the governor stop the execution. This time I wanted everything in a tissue and bowed package—not a fiasco like the night I'd beaten John Cartello. I needed more than the picture Joey Phipps had given me, a shot of a woman with her face turned away from the camera. I had to see the movies Kopecchi had taken of Myra and Chris Cartello.

Kopecchi told me the rest of it in the taxi.

The picture I had was a single frame from the movie. While Kopecchi had been taking the movie,

a car arrived, parked at the front of my house. Kopecchi hid among the shrubs. John Cartello entered the patio, fired into the bedroom. He threw the gun inside, ran to his car and drove away, without seeing Kopecchi. The photographer needed only a glance to know Chris Cartello was dead. He escaped in the car Chris Cartello had left in the driveway. Somehow, John Cartello found out about Kopecchi. Kopecchi fled, hid, coming out only to sell enough smut pictures to exist.

I leaned back against the seat. It all fit with Myra's story at the trial. I was the only one who had believed her. But then, I loved her. I would make it up to her, all the lost time. I would spend every spare moment trying to wipe away the horror she must have known, alone in her cell. I'd make it a second honeymoon, and this time I'd spend it with her instead of the city's gutter scum.

We pulled up in front of Kopecchi's hotel at 12:15.

The smell of soiled clothing blended with the faint odor of photographic chemicals and sweat and stale cigarette smoke—the smell of a giant's bad breath. The room was pitch black. I had the sensation of walking into an underground garbage pit. Kopecchi flipped on the lights. The room was as dirty as it smelled. Two blankets had been nailed across the window,

making a photographer's darkroom of sorts. I picked out the cleanest of two cluttered chairs, cleared it, and dropped down onto the ripped and faded print covers. My last iota of energy was gone now that I had the proof to save Myra.

Harold Kopecchi chain-lit another cigarette, ground the first butt into the rug. He opened a bottle from the dresser, and splashed some of its contents into a paper cup.

"Gin?" he asked, motioning with the bottle.

"No. We haven't time."

He swallowed his drink and threw the crumpled paper cup onto the bed. Harold Kopecchi's body seemed to be about as clean as his soul. It was ironic that I'd found the man mainly responsible for the pornography that littered the city all the way from grade schools in the slums to the back room orgies of drunken socialties—and he was the one man in the world who could save Myra's life. A man who didn't deserve to be buried in the earth that Myra walked.

He set up a projector on a bed table and aimed it at a blank wall. He took a flat metal cannister from a locked drawer in the dresser, fished a small can out of a top drawer. He opened the film container and laid it on the dresser. He poised the small can over the film and struck a kitchen match on the thumb nail of his free hand.

I started up out of the chair.

"Sit down!" he commanded.

I dropped back, my palms cold with sweat.

He nodded at the can. "This is lighter fluid. I can easily destroy the film."

"What do you want, Kopecchi?"

"I want protection from the syndicate."

"You'll get it."

"And your promise that I will not be prosecuted for my—err—art work, for the organization. After all, if it were not for me, your wife would be only a painful memory by tomorrow morning."

"If you save my wife, Kopecchi, I'll do everything in my power to protect you from the organization and the law."

The match burned out between his fingers. He looked suddenly quite helpless and confused. "How . . . do I know you will keep your word?"

"You don't."

I leaned back. Klegg had asked me when I was going to let up. I could tell him now. Neither Kopecchi nor the law held any interest for me anymore. I had nearly cost Myra her life—my reward for trying to make the city streets safe. They even took away my badge when I fought back against the frame. Well, now they could all rot together—the D.A., the commissioner, all the self-righteous citizens, along with the whores and hookers and hoods—and I'd be able to walk past the garbage heap they

made without even holding my nose against the stink. And as soon as Kopecchi told his story to the officials, he could hop on the pile himself. That's one thing the nightmare had done for me. I could quit trying to make the world pay for the sour mess my life had been right from the world go. I'd soon have Myra again, and nothing else mattered.

"Would you get the lights?"

I turned, startled. Harold Kopecchi had the film threaded through the projector. He held one grimy-knuckled finger on the machine's switch and was looking at me expectantly. I shut off the lights and stumbled back to my chair in the dark. The only thing visible was the glowing tip of Kopecchi's cigarette, like a tiny peephole into hell.

A click. A square of brilliance seemed to erupt out of the wall and leap along a funnel of cigarette smoke until it was sucked into the cyclopean eye of the projector. The machine whirred, the square of light dimmed and a figure moved upon the wall.

Myra.

She expanded, filling the scene, as though the camera were a lover moving soundlessly toward her, taking her in with hungry eyes. The scene steadied. Myra posed before her full-length mirror, her back to me, the front of her body in reflection. She was fastening her silk robe, pale skin glimmering like

flecks of stars through the thin material. The cloth clung to the bath-dampened curve of her hips and breasts, clearly outlined in the bright lights of the bedroom. A small frown crossed her forehead. She turned, her negligee closed now. The scene leaped away, spread, and another figure walked into view.

Kopecchi's voice sounded above the rattle of the projector, abrupt, jangling after the mute pictures on the wall. "I used a zoom lens. I think I did a fine job, under the conditions. That mirror trick, for example. Of course, it was a good thing Mr. Cartello was right about there being enough light. Watch this next scene . . ."

His voice droned on, but I heard no more. I was watching the picture, watching Myra and Chris Cartello. She glided toward him, a soundless specter of beauty. Her arms lifted from her sides, spread, hands reaching toward him. She touched him. Her fingers traced gentle paths along his arms until they joined and clasped behind his neck. She was smiling, lips formed in the taunting pout of a woman who knows a man's desire and is willing, eager to fulfill it. She mashed her open mouth against his, her eyes closed with the savagery of the contact. Her eyes opened again, her lips and body alive with the kiss, and in her eyes was the excitement, the same hungry intoxication I had first seen on the night

I captured the mugger; the same frenzied ardor that had filled her eyes each time we had loved.

I gripped the arms of my chair, my fingers entities with life of their own, the nails tearing the chair cover. Blood ran wet on my chin from the lip I clenched between my teeth. I wanted to scream, *Enough!* I wanted to smash the projector, destroy the lies that it splattered upon the wall. I tried to close my eyes, wrench my vision from the lighted square, but I was held, stricken by the sudden knowledge of how alone I'd always been, and never really known.

I watched her disrobe, the silk falling away, held now only by her hands, slipping now to the floor. I watched her help him with his clothes, lead him to the bed, her body already in sensuous movement as she dropped eagerly down.

Not being forced down. *Willing.*

Eyes not wide with fear. *Desire.*

Body not shrinking. *Demanding.*

. . . the trial witnesses . . . people I thought had lied . . . who had seen them together on nights I had spent fighting the syndicate, the whole world . . . nights Chris Cartello had spent setting this up to ruin me with the department . . . and even in death, he was destroying me in a way he had never

hoped for, could never have guessed . . .

I watched Myra's mouth go slack with passion, watched and remembered the other movies I had seen, of prostitutes, whores like Arlene Hutton who used her hands in the practised ways of whores, the way Myra was using her hands before me.

Myra . . . my Myra . . . the one good, clean thing in my life . . . my innocent, loving bride of two months . . .

The film chattered to an end. Darkness slapped at me like a living hand, leaving only a searing after-image of the final scene printed on my eyes, the frozen phantoms of Myra and Chris Cartello, embraced.

From the dark, a demon's eyes, the fiery tip of Kopecchi's cigarette, the faint, oh, so faint devil's mask of his crimson-tinted face as he sucked at the cigarette between his lips.

Kopecchi.

Eyewitness.

The one person in all the world who could save my wife. Who could prevent Myra's writhing, gasping death under a smothering cloud of gas.

I aimed my gun at the glowing spark of fire in Kopecchi's mouth. I started to sob as I pulled the trigger.



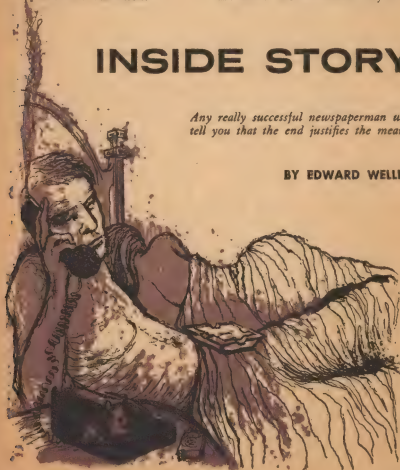
PETE RICHARDS awakened and, for a borderline moment, underwent a disquieting disorientation. During that moment it seemed to him sleep had been the reality and what he was waking into now was the dream. He snorted, impatient with himself at this lapse from sharp and sure definition.

The sound threatened to get through to Vi, flushed and disheveled loveliness, beside him. She made a face in her sleep, then turned and burrowed her head under the pillow. He eyed her and wondered what adjustments her dream was making to account for the snort. He wondered idly if he

INSIDE STORY

Any really successful newspaperman will tell you that the end justifies the means.

BY EDWARD WELLEN



figured in her dream. Knowing Vi, he would not be Peter Richards, individual, but Pete Richards, an answer to a need.

He reached out for cigarette pack, lighter, ash tray, stuck a cigarette into his wry smile, and lay in bed, ash tray on his smooth chest, his eyes narrow—to bar smoke and light—as the slits of the closed Venetian blind. Coffee and bacon and eggs from another apartment sent tendrils weaving through the threads of smoke and brought him to an awareness of his own contented emptiness and of a renewing hunger.

The phone rang. He pressed out his cigarette, scooped up the phone. Vi burrowed her head deeper, fitting the ring into the course of her dream rather than admit to an outside world.

He held his voice down. "Yes?" "Mr. Peter Richards?" A precise voice.

"Speaking."

"Editor of the Chronicle?"

"I'm city editor of the Chronicle, yes. Right now, though, I'm off. Won't it wait till I'm back at my desk?" That was wrong. As a good newsman he was always open for a news break. Had he sensed what was coming was something that, deep down, he dreaded having to face? "Who's calling?"

"This is Dr. Bell, of Mountjoy Hospital, and it's about Harry Stevens."

Pete Richards sat up a little, shift-

ing the ash tray. The mad glint of a hot coal, in the instant before it grayed, caught his eye.

"Oh, yes. Sad case. How's he coming along?"

Harry Stevens. With something of a shock Richards realized that in his mind he had already reduced Harry Stevens to a name. It took an effort now to visualize the man; he could summon up only the narrow eyes, the slyly blackmailing eyes. Without saying a word Harry Stevens had used the cunning look to hint at what he knew or suspected. He had worked it to get himself a byline, a raise, the juicy assignments. That had been a bad time for Richards—the office buzzing, the feeling that the publisher was eyeing him as if thinking Richards was losing his grip letting Stevens cover stories he couldn't really handle.

"... When he first came in he showed signs of a strong delusional system . . ."

The voice on the other end of the line sounded professionally clear and crisp, the tone of one who has found a sphere of order in a disordered world, but the words came through to Richards vaguely and disjointedly. It was his own fault—he was listening not to the words but for something behind the words. What that something would be, he didn't know. Maybe it was a dread that the Harry Stevens the doctor was talking about would refuse to remain a name, and symptoms attaching to that name, but

would become reality in Richards' mind.

To hell with that. To him, people weren't people, they were names. From birth to obituary they were names in news stories and captions.

"... Now his case seems to be taking a new turn..."

Richards wried his neck to hold the phone in place. This left him free to shake out another cigarette and light it with stiff hands.

"... Claims you assigned him to get himself committed for an inside story of conditions here."

Careful now, more sorrow than anger. "Now, why would I have him do that? Everyone knows you run a model institution, Doctor Bell."

"Thank you. I'm sorry to have troubled you, but you understand I had to confirm my diagnosis."

"Sure."

"This only goes to strengthen my initial impression. I'm afraid Mr. Stevens is definitely paranoid."

"Poor Harry. You know, doctor, in a way I feel a bit responsible for his going off the deep end."

"Oh? How is that?"

"I pushed him ahead too fast, gave him more than he could handle. I think that's when he started going to pieces. I had to warn him to pull himself together. Still: easy as I tried to be on him he kept laying down on the job. Finally, I had to tell him he was in for a pink slip."

Richards reached over and molded a palm to the roundness of Mrs. Harry Stevens, tempting in a pink slip.

"I know you'll take good care of Harry. If it'll ease his mind, tell him I'll see his wife doesn't want."



MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack



Colt Detective Special

The COLT DETECTIVE SPECIAL is a snub-nosed, round stock version of the powerful Colt Police Positive Special revolver. Universally popular with detectives, plainclothes men and payroll clerks, it is easily carried in shoulder holster or pocket, and, like the Police Positive, is equipped with the Colt positive safety lock which prevents accidental discharge.

HE wished Rita would stop that foolishness about her nose. Even though he could not find the words to tell her so he loved everything about her, her small well developed figure, her fair hair, her clear eyes and, yes, her overpowering nose.

But he had always been inarticulate. As a little boy in the old country, when it was his turn to recite, his teachers would sigh with exas-

never questioning her expenditures. He showed his appreciation of her cooking by cleaning his plate at each meal. She had only to mention a movie, a restaurant or a friend she wished to visit and he accompanied her without protest. She often told him that he was the kindest, gentlest and most thoughtful husband in the world.

Rita was his second wife and she seemed happy, except when she

For the Sake of Love

All she wanted was to make herself beautiful . . . for him.

BY HILDA CUSHING

peration. No matter how well he knew the answers he found it difficult to put them into words.

Because Otto's clumsiness was confined to the spoken word, he made up to Rita in other ways. His skillful hands fashioned the lovely furniture that filled their home. The ample paycheck he received from the woodworking factory that was the main support of the little town, he turned over to her each week,

ranting about her nose.

"It's a man's nose," she would storm during her moments of discontent. "So help me, Otto, all my life it has been my curse."

He tried to comfort her. One of his big hands would touch her gently on her shoulder as if to say, "I love you. Doesn't that make up for it?" But what actually came out of his mouth was a mumbled, "There, there, Rita."

She would grasp his hand tightly and sigh, "Dear Otto, if I could only be beautiful for you."

The day Otto found her brooding over the picture of his first wife, he almost struck her. He thought he had destroyed them all but this small one must have stayed hidden among the things he had packed before hurriedly leaving his homeland just before the occupation. It was Lisalotte's last picture taken just before her death.

"Otto," Rita was most abject. "She was beautiful! Her darling little nose! How ever could you look at me with this monstrosity?" And she pummelled her generous nose with its bulbous tip as though she would remove it completely. Pressing the snapshot to her breast she became the epitome of despair.

He snatched the picture from her hands and tore it to shreds before he raised his fist to strike her. When he saw the fright in her eyes he hesitated and then with a shudder he slowly lowered his hand. The next moment he stumbled into her arms. They held tightly to each other while Rita wept and Otto tried to control his shivering.

He never could understand her love for him. As they lay in bed at night, the only time he felt his love was eloquent, she would seem to explain it to him. "Otto, precious, you are the rock of my life. I couldn't possibly live without you. If you could only know how I knocked about before we met. No one ever

wanted to marry me before. No one at all. Everyone just made fun of me. Oh sure, Rita's fun, Rita's a card, but what a joke, what a nose! Otto! Otto! I do love you so much, but how could you every marry such a clown!"

He would shut her mouth then very satisfactorily and until the next time she had occasion to scold her nose everything would be peaceful and happy.

Suddenly not long after they were married she said she would have to visit her sister. She had never spoken much of her relatives, much less expressed any desire to visit them. Of course, with his old world concern for family he found it understandable when she explained, "Darling Otto," with her arms around him, "I'll be back soon. My sister's very sick and I've promised to take care of her until she can get on her feet again. Surely you will let me go to her."

In his first anxiety he became almost articulate. "Not too long," he begged.

She promised she would come back as soon as her sister could spare her. In his slow and careful way he helped her pack while he listened numbly to her many suggestions for his welfare during her absence. The only thing that kept him from complete misery was her promise to return soon and her promise to write.

He lived through each day mechanically. Up at dawn, drink

down the coffee and juice, eat the cereal and toast, and then to work. Home at night to a lonely supper and television until ten. Then to sleep in a cold and passionless bed. Her letters saved him. During the six weeks she was away she wrote almost every day. Her final letter promised her return late in the afternoon on a Tuesday.

Shortly after five he came home to a still empty house but he knew she would soon be there. With a light heart he started supper. First he made soup, good strong soup from mixing two cans of different flavors, a much admired trick of Rita's. Then the potatoes in the oven, he took a package of meat from the refrigerator.

As he cut the beef in thin strips he felt as though he could hardly wait for Rita's return and when he heard her quick steps on the back porch his heart almost stopped with happiness. Even after she had opened the kitchen door and stood inside without speaking, he waited before turning around, to savour his first sound of her.

"Otto! Otto!" her voice was charged with excitement. "Look at me, oh my darling, look at your wife!"

He turned slowly to stare at her, to engulf her with his eyes . . . the knife still in his hand.

Rita's voice took on a note of gay impatience as she moved close to him. "Lover, it's me. It's Rita, your beautiful Rita. Just think! Some of that time you thought I was taking care of my sister I was in a hospital having a beautiful nose made for you—just for you!" She turned her head sideways so he could see her profile. "The scars are all inside and the swelling is almost gone. See Otto," her voice was filled with the wonder of it. "Just like the picture!"

He looked at her, his wife with her small and beautiful nose.

"No," he said thickly. "No! No!" His voice cracked as he plunged the knife deep in her breast—just as he had plunged another knife into the wanton breast of his beautiful and faithless Lisalotte back in the old country before the occupation.



GOOD AT HEART

An ageing widow, loaded with money, with a heart as big as all out-doors . . . she was a con-man's dream.

BY JOHN KNOX

BITTNER had heard the oft-quoted truism that no man is an island unto himself, but he scorned it as he scorned all truisms. Like "Crime Doesn't Pay", it was strictly for suckers.

He was thirty, a successful jewel-thief, a handsome blond young man, poised, if a trifle soft from easy living. He patronized bespoke tailors and the best hotels, was a versatile, if shallow conversationalist, better at indoor than at outdoor sports, and he had a bank account. He was a confirmed lone wolf.

Few suspected Bittner's real vocation, but among these was Tara Landry, the only female member of a confidence gang, now summering at the same resort. As she told him frankly, "I don't admire you at all, Rod; it's just that I love you. It's like poison ivy, or astigmatism, or something. But you're a cold fish."

"I've been told otherwise," he answered blandly.

"I don't mean sex," she said. "It's



something more basic. And it's not just that you can't warm to me. You can't seem to warm up to anyone."

"Doll," he told her, "warming up to people is the way you get a touch of sun," and he tapped one temple significantly with a pale, well-manicured finger. "But you mentioned business."

"Yes . . ." she expelled her breath with the air of a gambler who has torn up lottery tickets before, and spoke crisply. "It's short and sweet. It's Spoda says you've been horn-ing in on a mark we were putting up. He says, light a shuck or we'll beef—"

Bittner touched his lips with the tip of a snowy napkin. Across a chaste expanse of crystal and silver and muted music, he stared at the object of their remarks, alone at a distant table, one garish flower in a formal garden.

"My gaudy orchid," he sighed, studying almost fondly the other woman's coarse featured face and incredible pink hair. "Five million dollars. Think of it. Widow of the wheeler-dealer, Duke Duquesne. Doll, I am drawn to that woman—"

"Drawn by the gleam of that bushel of Tiffany knickknacks she hauls around with her. Pig! But we know your game."

Bittner smiled. "You know nothing. You merely suspect. Because I'm a loner. But what I know about you, I *know*."

It was the truth. The island unto himself! She left him angrily and

without another word, a really stunning girl, with dark hair like the leaf shadows over a magnolia blossom. But dynamite. Because you couldn't con her. What she wanted was the real quill—LOVE. And about that Bittner knew nothing. Thank God.

That afternoon, on the beach with Mrs. Hilda Duquesne, he huddled under the shadow of her beach umbrella, pampering his white skin which cringed from the direct sun-rays. With covert distaste he measured the formidable mass sprawled in magnificent rapport with the golden heat, absorbing it as greedily as the sand which was not so brown as her tawny body.

Forty-five she had told him, and he believed it; the five million relieved her of the need to lie about that. But not more, and not a decrepit forty-five. The big bones were well and symmetrically fleshed, the skin tough but with the clean salty smell of gilded leather. The pink hair was impossible, but a pot of rinse would change that; and the long face with its generous flash of horsy teeth and warm, if slightly muddy, brown eyes, was bearable, if not attractive.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of marrying her. But at that moment she turned her head slightly, the strong neck wrinkling like a twisted paper bag, and thrust toward him a limp wrist on which dangled the gauche silver bracelet with its frill of pendant hearts. Like

the sickeningly sweet pink candy you used to give to the girls in school!

"See, I've added a new one? Can you guess why?" she asked.

Bittner winced. He had never had the courage to inquire what the silver hearts stood for, anticipating an answer so uniquely and distressingly vulgar that he wouldn't be able to keep a straight face. Now he strained for the proper coyness. "Not for me?"

She laughed, a healthy, inoffensive sound, and the implied denial sobered him. "No, but then, I never told you why—"

"I had supposed," he said. "that like the notches on a killer's gun, they are the records of your conquests."

"Conquests? Now you're teasing. And that's not nice, Roddy. I never had any—only the Duke, and he, bless him, never lied about my looks. No—" and she lowered her voice to an arch whisper, "they are the tokens of my secret vices—little charities, young scientists and artists whom I subsidize. This new one I learned about through friends at the university back home. A real research genius who doesn't want to be tied to a big company. So I've created a trust fund of a hundred thousand—"

"My God!" Bittner jumped so violently that he flung himself into the sun. He retreated, collecting his wits. "I mean, it's really a lot of money. And are there others?"

"Five," she confided, and ticked off the dangling hearts. She studied his face, "But maybe you have some project, some secret dream, if you only had the money—"

"Me?" The implied offer was also an inquiry. It made him wary. "Oh, no, I'm fairly well off. Not in your class, but too lazy to want more. Still I must say you seem very careless—"

"By investing in humanity, Roddy? Oh no—"

"Grant that," he waved the lecture away, "but you're careless in other respects too. Those jewels that you keep in the hotel safe, for instance."

"They aren't safe there?" she asked in surprise.

"My dear girl, that safe would be a matchbox for a real peterman. And the clerk and the house dick would be pushovers for a heist. But the reason I'm telling you," he added, "is that I got a tip from a hotel employee who likes me (and they know plenty). He's spotted a certain face among the guests—"

"Dear me. Is the danger immediate, you think?"

"When those hyenas show up, they often act fast."

"Then I'll have to move them," she said. "A bank in the city would be best. But that takes time. Meanwhile . . ." she frowned, considering, "I'll just keep them in my room tonight."

"But Hilda, the risk to yourself—" His surprise was genuine. He had

hoped she would decide to take them to the city, would invite him to go along. This development seemed almost too much. "It would be too dangerous. They'd be armed —"

"So would I," she smiled. "You forget what state I'm from, Roddy. I learned to shoot, on a ranch, when I was a girl. And I have a gun, a forty-five, no less. It belonged to the Duke."

He didn't care if she had a howitzer. He was no common cat-burglar. He had robbed a Marchesa, a Brazilian banker's wife, and three movie stars—all sober at the time. And the physical problem, the actual mechanics, were a snap. It was as simple as that the thing seemed too simple, and he was always wary of imponderables. He argued against her intention, but more feebly. After all, she was forcing his hand a bit, but he couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

And events persisted in moving in the desired pattern. The gems (he had estimated that they would bring fifty grand even from a fence) were moved discreetly. And Hilda had him to dinner with her in her room that night. She showed him the gun, which she meant to place—of course—under her pillow. The gems, wrapped in a towel would be—naturally—under her mattress.

Nevertheless he cautioned her to put on the burglar chain. He had long since attended to her bathroom window, and gone mentally over

every step in the caper. Never had he felt so completely sure of success, yet never, strangely, so plagued by a completely irrational anxiety.

He stopped at the hotel bar for a double scotch, and spotted Tara alone and sullen at a table. Leaving, he paused beside her to say, "Forget everything, Doll. It's out of your hands. I'm going to marry her—or the five million."

"Want to die smothered instead of hanged?" she asked.

The remark bothered him later, but at the moment he brushed it aside. By the time he was ready, in the small hours of the morning, dressed all in black and carrying his scant equipment, the uneasiness had vanished. Like an edgy athlete, he had grown cool in the crisis of action. Less than thirty minutes after leaving his room he stood in the dark at Hilda's bedside, breathing the redolent odor of her cosmetics, timing her harsh but regular breathing. Then he was kneeling soundlessly, reaching with a pick-pocket's feathery touch beneath the mattress, delicately easing out the towel-wrapped booty.

He had it and was rising on elastic knees when, with no warning whatever, he felt light blaze against his eyeballs and saw the wicked barrel of the forty-five levelled on his belly. His only hope that he would live long enough to choke her. Then he noticed the oddly cool expression on Hilda Duquesne's shadowed face.

"Put them down, Roddy," the woman said quietly, as one speaks to a child, "put them down and sit here on the bed beside me."

Bittner was paralyzed, not by physical fear now, but by a sense of utter unreality. But she was actually moving over, raising her squarish shoulders, gathering her gown modestly, resting the big gun gently upon the coverlet. Speechless, spellbound, he obeyed her like an automaton.

"That's better," she said. "And now, Roddy, you're going to say I ambushed you, led you on. And so I did. I am an older person than you, and I could not help seeing the look of childish greed on your face when that money was discussed today. Your warning about moving my gems came too soon afterward. It was only too transparent, as is the fact that you're an amateur, and probably penniless despite your boast. But don't think I consider you stupid, or even bad. I know it's hard to be poor but personable, to be exposed to a rich world you can't quite enter. So Roddy, I simply had to teach you a lesson."

Well here it is, Bittner told himself. "All right," he said aloud. "You've got me cold. Go ahead and call the law."

"The law, Roddy? Oh dear! You're really more cynical than I thought. It quite distresses me. Light us a cigarette, will you?"

He was grateful for the sugges-

tion; he needed one desperately. But as he leaned toward her with the match, the light struck the broad, homely planes of the face, and a sudden knowledge of her intentions was too much for him. His nerves collapsed and he grasped her free hand and covered the gritty knuckles with his kisses. "Oh, Hilda, my dear!" the sob was so genuine that it tempted him to a further extravagance. "Dear Hilda, you must understand that it was my feeling for you, the bitterness of my own poverty, of realizing that you were beyond my reach. . . ."

Gently, but firmly, she drew the hand away. "Now none of that nonsense, Roddy," she said. "It's really not worthy of you. And not necessary, we must talk business."

"Business?"

"The only business I have—rescuing people who need rescuing," she replied, "since Duke did all the money making that will ever be necessary. So you must understand that I don't consider you dangerous—or even bad. You're just a thoughtless, misguided boy—perhaps a bit lazy."

"That's true," he agreed with blunt contrition.

"Good! And that isn't a sin. But robbing me would have been. I could have spared the gee-gaws, but you could not have spared the loss of character. Luckily, I acted in time—"

"Hilda, you mean you won't turn me into the law?"

"Not only that, I'm going to offer you a job."

"I wouldn't make much of a chauffeur," he said honestly.

"Chauffeur indeed! I'm going to offer you a job as my personal secretary—" She smiled at the doubtful, wary look on his face, and added, "but when I say personal, I don't mean intimate. That's out. Why, I'm old enough to be your mother. And maybe—"

Bittner took a deep breath. He had it now—the clue to point him a direction. Elderly women were capable of more than one kind of passion; his own cynicism had made him overlook the obvious. This woman's need—like her tasteless bracelet—was crudely simple. She needed, not someone to love her, so much as someone to accept her love!

And, incomprehensible as this feeling was to Bittner, he flattered himself that he could adjust to it. Artlessly, boyishly, he hung his head, "I'm a fool, Hilda. In the race of my life I never met a disinterested person before. I'm not even sure you're wise to trust me—"

"Let me be the judge of that," she said confidently.

He shrugged in manly surrender, "I'm in your hands."

He was just that, he soon discovered, and a strange role it was for Rodney Bittner, stranger still because the ordeals he had expected did not develop, whereas, the very

conditions he would have asked for became the source of unexpected frustrations.

For example, he had expected her to be the gentle schoolmarm, exhorting and sermonizing. But she wasn't at all. Beyond the duties of his job, she did not restrict him. She was, if anything, too understanding. Due to her generous tips to the hotel help, she seemed to know everything that happened. So he soon learned that a velvet leash has its disadvantages; it can follow you into places where a chain cannot go.

There was a certain amount of gossip about his new position, of course, but Bittner could take that in his stride. Harder to bear was Hilda's protective solicitude. Her high-chinned disdain for ridicules won his grudging respect, and their common front against the world drew them closer together. And if there was one thing Bittner could not stand, it was "togetherness."

As for Tara's threat to expose him, that evaporated. And since no danger was involved now, Bittner took the wind out of her sails by telling her frankly about his abortive robbery and the unexpected result. "So there'll be no pickings for you and your outfit," he said. "You may as well blow off."

"Oh, I'll stick around. You may need me yet. When you begin to feel yourself suffocating," she added.

She had planted an ugly seed and

it encouraged his growing resentment toward Hilda, even though she gave him nothing to resent. She was generous and even tactful beneath her surface crudity. Yet she did fence him in. They went to the beach, played bridge with her small group of friends, went to the movies in the village and the theatre in the city. Always she invited him with a deferential, "If you're really sure you have nothing more interesting to do," and that, of course, made it impossible to refuse. And there was really something at stake now. At the end of an amicable month, Hilda had created a trust fund for him—a hundred thousand dollars to provide him a generous income for life—providing, of course, that he remained in her employ.

"But that," she assured him, "will not be too grim. I'm planning soon to retire from social life to the ranch my parents operate, and then I won't need you—except for an occasional letter to assure me you're alright. But the terms of our contract and the benefits of the trust will still apply."

But *when, when?* The question became a torture. She announced a date, changed her mind, changed it again, using each threat of imminent parting as an excuse for more pampering, more loving attention. "It's getting unbearable," he told Tara. "I don't suppose you can understand, but—"

"I'm afraid not," she said drily.

"I never had too much love forced on me. But, of course, there are creatures who can't bear the sunlight—bats and moles."

"Go ahead and be nasty. I'm suffering, all the same—"

"Then just take a powder. I'll still go with you . . ."

"And leave a hundred thousand dollars? Are you crazy? But I tell you I feel like some northern plant set down in a tropic swamp—stifled by the pressure and warmth of big fleshy flowers, oozing perfume and honey . . . it's awful!"

"I could stand a little of it," she laughed. "But, well, try getting away from her more . . ."

"Try! I'd have to drug her. And she knows the symptoms of sleeping pills. But—" he stopped, with a sudden idea, "I'll bet she's never had a mickey-finn. Chlorl-hydrates, isn't it? You used to be a B-girl, does it make them very sick?"

"Only a little, a chill, drowsiness, then blotto. A very slight hangover. But she does occasionally overdrink, doesn't she?"

He nodded. "And beer, of couse, though the doctor's warned her about her heart. . . ."

The result of this conversation was that Bittner began to go around with a small phial of white crystals in his pocket. And he saw more of Tara—without having to resort to the mickey-finn at first. She had told him, "We could probably have a little fun together, now that you don't seem afraid of me anymore.

As for marrying you, I don't think I even want to now."

It was this coolness which endeared her to him. They had a lot of fun.

Then came a day when they planned a quiet week-end together and Bittner had succeeded in making his excuses to Hilda in advance. But at the last moment, she complained of feeling ill.

"But you go ahead with your other plans," she told him.

"Oh, I couldn't. But maybe if you'd go to bed . . ."

"Not that. I refuse. Why, if I were ready to die, I'd still seek the outdoors. I'll go for a little outing by myself. I'll go to the cove—"

This was an isolated retreat to which they often went together. A little beach, walled in by the sandstone cliffs they called "the Balconies," it was close and easy to reach by boat, but almost impossible to reach of foot, and hence free from intrusion by bathers. Bittner continued to protest feebly against her trip, but finally gave in with secret relief. He walked out with her to the pier, loaded her parasol and lunch basket and the thermos of cold bock in the outboard motor boat, and helped her in.

The resident doctor happened to be on the pier at the time, and he shook a finger at her. "I've warned you! And if you've got what I think you have in that thermos, you're asking for it. Aren't you going?" he asked Bittner.

"I don't want him," Hilda spoke before Bittner could answer. "I get tired of his bossy ways. I want to get off to myself once in a while." She started the motor expertly and gave them a sailor's salute.

Bittner watched her, happy as a schoolboy with an unexpected holiday. But almost immediately the mood was poisoned by doubts. This touch of illness, this gallant renunciation. He knew her moods, and it frightened him. She must have heard of his frequent dates with Tara! And if she changed her mind about the trust fund, all she had to do was fire him. Then all the misery he had gone through would have been wasted, all the rosy future blotted out.

"You seem at a loose end, my boy," the doctor's voice startled him. "One does get dependent, eh?"

Was it a jibe? Bittner laughed. "Oh, I've got a date. Taking a girl out to Gull Island. But I was selfishly hoping Hilda wouldn't want to use her boat—"

"Well, well," the doctor chuckled. "But you can use mine."

So Bittner hunted up Tara, and though they had not planned to leave so soon, persuaded her that this was an emergency. They quickly assembled a passable amount of picnic stuff and took off for Gull Island in the doctor's boat, making their departure as public as possible.

"You've sure got the fidgets. Why the fanfare?" Tara asked.

He was busy with the tiller, dressed in a conspicuous red terry-cloth beach jacket, a big straw hat, and slacks over his bathing trunks to protect him from the sun. "I've got a sixth sense for trouble," he told her. "And the fanfare is to let them see where we're headed. But I've got to contact Hilda. I'm afraid she's got a brain-blow, and she may cut me off flat if I don't get her pacified. Now you just do as you're told."

The island was just far enough offshore for figures on its beach to be invisible from the mainland. It's advantage to Bittner lay in the fact that a small peninsula thrust out from it at a point opposite the curve in the mainland which formed the cove to which Hilda had gone. Here the cove was much closer than the hotel beach, and a figure swimming toward it would be invisible in the water until he had reached a position where the sandstone cliffs shielded him from view. Bittner meant to swim it.

But first he set up the gaudy parasol on the beach, spread a colorful blanket and told Tara to stay in sight. "In the unlikely event that a boat passes and someone asks for me, just say I've gone back into the woods," he told her.

She frowned, then shrugged, as he started off in a trot toward the peninsula's tip.

There he shed the hat, jacket, slacks, and struck out into the surf. He had made himself a fairly good

swimmer in the indoor pools of athletic clubs and liners, and he waded ashore at the cove, panting and suffering from the sun, but far from exhausted.

He spotted Hilda's parasol at once, and her big shape sprawled face down nearby. At first she seemed to be motionless, but then he saw that her shoulders were shaking with silent sobs.

"Hilda!" he called, "Hilda!"

She came up with a start, turned, and suddenly smiled through the tears that ran down across her makeup. "Oh Roddy, I hoped—"

"But you must have *known*—" he came up and knelt beside her. I couldn't leave you when I saw you so upset. I went to the island with a friend, but I couldn't resist swimming over to see—"

"Oh, Roddy, and all for me!" Then her face darkened. "Friend? Is it that girl, Tara Landry?"

He nodded. "But you aren't jealous? You said—?"

"Not jealous," she replied. "But I won't have all my work wasted. That girl's a crook, Roddy. I know it. Remember you warned me about crooks at the hotel? Well, it turns out to be true. She's a member of the gang. You see, I have my sources also . . ."

Yes, he knew. Those big tips! "You're mistaken, Hilda—"

"No I'm not," her tone was firm. "Take her if you want her, but you must choose. You can't have your cake and eat it too!"

He turned away to hide his scowl. His eyes roved along the cliffs, the approaches. Empty. He said, "No mere acquaintance—and that's all she is—can come between us, Hilda!"

When he turned, his face composed again, she was beaming. "Oh, Roddy, I'm so happy! We'll have a bock to celebrate!"

As he turned to reach for the thermos there came, again, a warning flash: *too easy*. But there was no time for hesitancy now. With his hands shielded by his body, he removed the small phial from the flap pocket of his trunks and spilled a measured dose of white crystals into one of the paper cups he had set on the sand. Then he poured brown, syrupy brew from the thermos, and turning shook it slightly to let the crystals dissolve. "Good old bitter bock!" he said. "Best tonic of all!"

Had he made it too obvious—that *bitter* business?

But no, her big homely face showed only pleasure as she accepted, touched cups with him, and drank with the gusto of her sturdy ranch forebears. "Now!" she said, her face radiant. "I'll tell you one reason I was so hurt—". Playfully, she raised one arm and shook the awful bracelet with the silver hearts dangling from their little chains. "I've added a heart for you! I wanted you to be pleased, though I know you don't admire the bracelet itself."

He didn't, and at the moment it struck him almost with horror, the hearts reminding him of trophies, of dried heads on a jungle charm—and his among them!

It was the thing which finally decided him. For the chloral hydrates were, of course, not a poison. They would only cause a dead, deep sleep. But now his glance stole to the waves licking up the sand; the tide, inexorable as the sun itself, was rising.

"It's lovely," he told her, his eyes on the bracelet but his thoughts elsewhere. "It's lovely everything's settled too."

She finished her drink and stretched again on the sand. He lay beside her. He meant to stay only a moment before moving back under the umbrella, but with a sudden, impulsive, loving gesture, she laid her hand upon his already smarting back. He managed not to wince, but the touch of the cool silver trinkets, the clammy pressure of the imprisoning hand and arm, were almost more than he could bear. "You won't regret your decision, Roddy," she crooned.

He lay perfectly still, in an agony of suspense. Had her voice sounded drowsy? He hoped so. The sun beat on his back, the heat rose from the sand into his eyes, yet he dared not move, dared not disturb the processes of sleep which he hoped were working. Some moments later she gave a little shiver.

"Feel a slight chill . . ."

"So do I," he said quickly. "Wind's changing—"

It wasn't, but she didn't argue. That was a good sign. She didn't move, and after what seemed an aeon of time, when he was sure her breathing had become slow and shallow, he raised slightly, observed her flushed neck and flaccid features, and crawled out from under her arm.

Five to eight hours the dose would hold her. He watched the little waves creeping up the sand, pushing their green-white fringe to within a foot of her face. It would do it. He ran out toward the surf, breasted the waves, feeling the sting of brine on his blistered skin at first, but afterwards a soothing coolness. He swam powerfully, drawn now by a strange zest and eagerness which he realized, with surprise, was more than a mere craving for reassurance and safety. It was a craving for Tara herself!

But as he came dripping upon the island's beach, hastily flinging the red jacket over his smarting shoulders, he noticed that the boat stood off a little from the shore, that Tara was in it, idly holding the position with a paddle.

He snatched up the rest of his clothes and ran toward her through the surf. "Tara, what are you doing?"

Eyes narrowed on his flushed face, she asked, "What have you been doing?"

"Bringing you some wonderful

news, Tara!" he tried to smile cheerily. "And while doing it, I've realized something, something new and delicious too—the way I feel about you . . ."

"Skip that stuff!" she said roughly. "Did you *do* something to her?"

"What?" He understood it now. She was afraid. He glanced along the island's deserted shore and was afraid too. For she held all the cards; he was the suppliant now. And if she deserted him there was no way to return to the mainland except by way of the cove, and that was unthinkable. "Tara, please," he began to beg, "come nearer, let me explain. I won't lie to you. Something *did* happen. But I didn't do it. She had a stroke. But listen, Tara, the money's mine now—ours—all of it. I want you to share it with me, Tara, because . . . I love you!"

She began to laugh, coarsely, obscenely, and each peal stabbed him like a knife. He fell on his knees in the cool water, "Tara, you don't understand. I want to marry you. And I couldn't cheat you then; it would be half yours by law. And we can get married at once—today. No one knows I've been with her; it will be hours before she's found. Tara, whether you want me or not, you can't turn a hundred thousand dollars down. . . ."

She listened coldly, weighing his words. She hesitated. But finally she began to paddle the boat slowly toward him.

They stayed on the island for

long enough to make the picnic story plausible. They returned to the hotel pier, and calmly, unhurriedly, went in. "Go to your room at once," he told her, "change clothes and come to mine. We have plenty of time; we'll be back, married, and quite as surprised and grieved as anyone when the accident is discovered."

She left him. It wasn't until the spray of his shower struck him that he remembered what he had forgotten in his anxiety—the blistered back. Now he forgot it again, because, almost at once, and simultaneously, a siren sounded outside, and his doorbell rang.

He stepped out, slipped into shorts, flung a towel over his back and went to answer it. It was Tara. Her eyes were big with fright. "They've already found her . . . a fisherman. He took the doctor out, and they've come back. And the doctor doesn't think it was a stroke . . . He's worried about something . . ."

"Never mind," Bittner knew he had to keep his nerve now. "It won't matter. You'll swear I was with you all the time—" He drew her into the room, closed the door, walked toward his liquor cabinet, his nerves screaming for a drink. "Won't you?"

She didn't answer at once. "You'd better—" He flung the towel angrily from his shoulders, reached for a bottle.

He heard her gasp. He turned to

see her staring at him, speechless, one hand across her mouth. He moved toward her, but she backed away. Then she turned, opened the door, and with a little scream ran out into the hall.

Bittner stood in the doorway staring dumbly at the bottle in his hand. "Is she nuts, or am I a leper—?" But footsteps approached from the other direction—the doctor, hurrying.

"Ahhhh, Bittner! You've heard, I suppose. You said you were on the island all afternoon? Didn't go near the cove?"

"No, definitely not. Tara will tell you. But wasn't it a stroke. I heard—"

"It's possible . . . but her lungs were full of water. And there's a queer little detail. Her thermos jug, water-logged, was several feet away from her. And the stopper was out, the cap off. If she'd had a stroke while using the thermos, I think she'd still be holding it, or it would be near her. If she didn't have a stroke, why did she fail to stopper the bottle? She'd have done it automatically. But if *someone else* . . ."

Bittner felt the world reeling. That little detail. Nothing in itself, but enough to cause a nosy doctor to ask for an autopsy. Then the chloral-hydrates would be found. Still, if Tara would stand by him! He had to find her, tell her . . .

"If you'll excuse me," he said, "I'll dress and—"

He turned. The doctor continued

to stand in the doorway. Suddenly he called, "Carmichael, what's keeping you?"

That was the name of the house detective. Steps came running up the hall. "Is everybody nuts?" Carmichael was gasping. "That girl detained me . . . leaving her room, with a traveling bag . . . Scared to death. Made me see her to her parked car . . ."

"Show him, Bittner," the doctor said. "Show him your back!"

Then Bittner saw it—craning at a pier glass on the wall behind him. One glance was enough. On the red, sunburned surface of his back was the clean imprint of a hand and arm. But that wasn't all. The bulky diagonal of a bracelet crossed the wrist. And near, it, distinct as a white embossing on the pink skin, the pattern of a small heart.

"Only bracelet like that I ever saw in my life," the doctor said. "Get your gun out, Carmichael!"

Bittner moved then—moved toward the open window. Three stor-

ies below the flat concret surface of the parking lot swam in heat waves. He went out and down like a diver.

* * *

Hours later, in a white hospital room, where the resuscitator had been shut off and the patient had begun to breath normally at last, the doctor smiled and said:

"A tough pull, Hilda, but you made it—"

"But Roddy," she asked, "why hasn't Roddy come?"

He had to tell her something. He couldn't tell her all—not yet. "Roddy won't be here," he said. "Roddy had an accident—right after he learned about you. He, well, he fell, from a window."

"Fell?" she cried, rising in horror from the pillow. "Fell, doctor? Oh, no . . . It was because he thought I had drowned! Poor Roddy!" She began to sob. "Doctor he was like a poor plant that's starved for sunlight—for love. When he found it, it was just too much for him . . ."



The girl was so desirable that Ah Sing's eyes swam when he looked at her. His breath caught when he talked to her. She was perfect. He found it difficult to maintain a calm and business-like attitude.

THE OLD GUARD

BY MICHAEL ZUROY

IT CANNOT be questioned," said Loo Chun, "there is money in dishonesty."

"And power," added Ah Sing, nodding his head so that the lights glinted on his sleek black hair.

"We live in an age of progress," said Wen Wu Yang, the eldest of the three. "The honorable and respectable ways of our ancestors are no longer fashionable. Or desirable."

The three men sipped their tea. They were sitting at a table in a small tea-house in Chinatown, conversing in low voices and watching the ceaseless human traffic in the

narrow streets beyond the window. It was late afternoon and the lights of the tea-house had already been turned on, although they seemed to intensify the dark tones of the interior. The pungent and teasing street smells mingled subtly with the smells of the tea-house, and whenever the outside door opened and closed the droning street sounds entered.

"It is true that our tong has prospered in this country," Wen Wu Yang said. "We own real estate. We collect rents. We possess some small shops. But it is not enough."

"No," agreed Loo Chun. "It's

small time stuff. We're not modern. We don't move fast. This is an age of speed and bigness."

"That's right," Ah Sing said. "We got to get with it." The two younger men, their smooth moon faces and black hair scarcely distinguishable from each other, turned towards Wen Wu Yang, as though awaiting a pronouncement.

Wen Wu Yang, taller, lankier than the other two, with a thin wolfish face and narrower eyes, placed the tips of his fingers together. "We must drop our scruples," he said in his high quiet voice. "We must enter the rackets. That is the easy road to wealth and power."

The others nodded.

"Extortion," Wen Wu Yang said. "Gambling. Smuggling. Narcotics. Organized robbery and the disposal of stolen goods. Swindling. Wherever money is to be had for the taking, there we must operate."

The others nodded, sipping their tea.

"We will work undercover," Wen Wu Yang went on. "The Tong of the Blue Lizard will maintain a respectable face, but it will control many rackets. This will not be forever. When we are rich enough, we will drop the rackets."

"A means to an end," Loo Chun said.

There was a silence. The same thing was in the minds of all the men.

It was Ah Sing who voiced it. "With the proper leader, the tong

would go along. Many members are in sympathy with us already. The others would follow. However—Kin Fo Shoo is not the proper leader."

"No," Loo Chun said. "There sits the proper leader. A man with a modern mind, yet with enough family standing and support to lead the tong." Loo Chun and Ah Sing looked at Wen Wu Yang. Yang bowed his head modestly.

"Kin Fo Shoo must go," Ah Sing said. "So that you may lead us."

"I am afraid that you are right," Yang said, still modest. "Kin Fo Shoo is of the old school. He retreats from the smell of whatever is not proper and honorable. He scorns dishonesty. He is as inflexible as stone."

"Yet Kin Fo Shoo is an old man," ventured Loo Chun. "Perhaps we need only wait. . . ?"

"He is seventy," said Ah Sing. "He comes of a long-lived line. Would you want to wait another twenty or twenty-five years?"

"Evidently not . . . I but sought an alternative . . . to . . ."

"Kin Fo Shoo's death," said Ah Sing. "It must be."

The three men sipped their tea and meditated and looked out the window.

Wen Wu Yang said at last, "Will you kill him, Ah Sing?"

Ah Sing seemed to tremble at the simple question. His face lost its resolution.

"Then you, Loo Chun?" Wen Wu Yang turned to the other.

"I . . . am reluctant," said Loo Chun.

"And I," confessed Wen Wu Yang.

"What is this?" said Ah Sing. "Are we weak? Are we women? Are we chicken?"

"No," Yang said gravely. "We are not . . . chicken. We would have no hesitation with a stranger or an enemy. But certain traditions still have a hold on us. To harm another member of the Tong of the Blue Lizard is wrong. To slay our venerable leader with our own hands . . . is almost unthinkable."

"Yes, that's it," said Ah Sing with relief. "We cannot entirely escape our traditions. We're not afraid of blood. Now, what?"

"We hire a killer." Wen Wu Yang said it quietly.

"Of course."

"We must make a beginning," Yang said. "Ah Sing, I give you the task of finding a killer. An Occidental. A leader of a tong should not be slain by our own race."

Ah Sing nodded. "I will find one."

Ah Sing waited alone at a table at the rear of a shabby bar in the East Thirties. It had been delicate, frustrating work making contacts who could lead him to a professional murderer, but now the ground work was done. The killer was to meet him here.

Ah Sing did not begrudge the work. Much would have to be learned to prepare the Tong of the Blue Lizard for its new policy. The mechanics of murder must be mastered.

There would yet be many tedious and difficult details before the Tong was established in the rackets. Oh, but when that time came! He would be high among the powerful, near Wen Wu Yang himself. He was one of the founders of the new policy. He would be rich. He would be respected. The world would open for him like the petals of a lotus flower. He would buy fine and pleasurable things. He would buy women. No more for him, the lonely bed of a single man in a society where women were too few. No longer the stifling, uninteresting scribbling of a petty clerk in a government office.

So Ah Sing dreamed, an ordinary appearing young man in a neat dark business suit. So he dreamed, and did not observe the approach of the stranger.

"You the guy that's looking for Jerry?"

A man of a different temperament would have jumped. Ah Sing merely blinked and lifted his smooth impassive face. "Please sit down," he invited.

The man took the chair. He was slight, with a thin-lipped nervous face and very pale eyebrows and lashes. Ah Sing politely pushed a bottle of beer and the extra glass

towards him. "I am to discuss a . . . a departure . . . with someone named Jerry."

"A departure," repeated the man. The way he said it, it had a nasty sound. He gave a single dry snicker that was half-sneer. "O.K., if you want to call it that."

"What would the price be?" Ah Sing asked.

"Depends on the set-up. Talk to me."

"He is an old man," Ah Sing said. "I am sure he will give you no trouble."

"Don't be sure of nothin'," Jerry said truculently. "In this work, you never know. Keep talking."

"This man seldom leaves his house," Ah Sing said. "There is no need. His wants are supplied. There are inner courts and gardens. He has radio and television. Reports on the outside world are brought to him. One night a week, however, he walks out to wander the streets and see what is to be seen. He does not go alone. Two companions, old men also, accompany him. This is on a Tuesday night. It has been so since before I was born, and will not be otherwise."

The other man nodded curtly. "That's the night, then."

"It should not be hard," Ah Sing said. "There are shadowy doorways near his house. The entrance is through a quiet alley, and is lit by a lantern. You will discern him plainly. You will recognize him because he wears a pigtail. An oddity

nowadays, but the old man is not modern."

"A pigtail, hey?" said Jerry. "Real old time Chink, hey?"

Ah Sing's face did not change. When one had to use a rough tool, one must expect a scratch.

"Sounds O.K.," Jerry went on. "I can be waiting in a car. Plug him. Take off. Nobody's going to fuss too much about an old Chink."

"Do not harm the others," Ah Sing said.

"I don't miss, palsy," Jerry said. "The job will cost you a thousand. Half in advance."

Ah Sing took out a wallet thick with funds contributed by supporters of the new order and counted out five hundred dollars. "Next Tuesday, then?"

"O.K.," said Jerry. "I'll want to look over the layout beforehand."

On Tuesday night, Ah Sing, Loo Chun and Wen Wu Yang sat again in the little tea-house in Chinatown. "It lacks a half-hour of the time," Ah Sing said. "Possibly we will hear the shots."

"Yes, the shots," said Wen Wu Yang. There was a faint twist to his voice that was not satisfaction. He fidgeted and looked at Loo Chun. Loo Chun toyed nervously with his tea spoon.

Ah Sing was not happy either. He had not thought it would bother him, but as the moment drew near he knew that he could not remove some traditions as though

they were shoes. It was bad to cause the death of a person in one's tong, even if one did not do the actual killing. It was unmentionable in the case of an elder, the tong leader himself. Ah Sing sighed. He was feeling deeply uneasy.

Yet, it must be done.

Loo Chun sighed also. He sipped his tea and stared morosely into his cup. "I wish there were some other way," he said.

"Of course," said Wen Wu Yang. "It is a natural feeling. But what other way is so certain? We will await the shots. There can be no mistake, Ah Sing?"

"None. The man will know Kin Fo Shoo by his pigtail."

"Yes," Wen Wu Yang said. "By his pigtail. By the symbol that Kin Fo Shoo would never remove."

The men fell silent. Unpleasant things must be done, Ah Sing thought. Other unpleasant things would have to be done later. So it must be. It was the price one paid for power and wealth.

The men sipped their tea and waited. A chattering, smiling group entered the shop and took seats in a corner.

Suddenly Wen Wu Yang slapped the table. The others looked at him expectantly. Wen Wu Yang slapped the table again.

"It is easy to overlook the obvious," Yang said in his quiet, high voice. But the others did not miss a certain note in the voice. They fastened their dark eyes upon him.

"Kin Fo Shoo's pigtail," Yang said.

"Yes?" Ah Sing said respectfully.

"If he were to lose it?" Yang said.

"Ah," breathed Loo Chun.

"It is the symbol of tradition," Yang said. "His link with the ancestral past, the honorable and respectable past. It is part of his pride and strength. If it were taken from him, he would lose much face."

"Much face," agreed Loo Chun. "The tong would snicker behind his back."

"All Chinatown would snicker. And worse, pity him."

"Yes," Ah Sing said. "If someone cut off his pig-tail, he would be shamed. His dignity and authority would vanish in ridicule. He could no longer lead. He would resign his position." It was so, Ah Sing thought. Strange that a few strands of hair could make such a difference, but these were his people and he knew them. To be laughed at, to lose face, was to lose soul, to become less than a whole person. "Well, then," Ah Sing said, "we must cut off his pigtail."

"In ten minutes he will be dead," reminded Loo Chun.

In agitation, Ah Sing looked at Wen Wu Yang. "Save him if you can," Yang said. "This is a better way. We do not need his life. If he takes it by his own hand later, it is his own affair."

Ah Sing bowed and slipped out of the tea-house. He walked rapidly to the street where the killer waited

in his car. It was an unfrequented street, dimly lit, where ancient and rickety ware-houses mingled with the blank-faced residences.

"Ssss-t!" Ah Sing hissed at the dark car. "Jerry." He went up to the windows and said again, softly, "Jerry."

A muttered curse replied. Faintly he saw Jerry's head and shoulders turning to him. "Oh, it's you," said the killer. "Don't sneak up on me like that, buster. You almost got it."

"It's all off," Ah Sing said. "We do not wish the old man killed."

"What are you talking about?"

"No killing."

"I never run into this before," Jerry said after a brief silence. "Nobody yet gave me a job and took it away when I was in the middle of it. Where the hell do you come off to pull this stuff, buster? You promised me money, you don't welsh on me, hear?"

"You will be paid," Ah Sing said hastily. He took another five hundred from his wallet and passed it to the man. "Now," he said, "please go away."

The killer snarled something, snatched the money and drove away.

When Ah Sing returned to the tea-house and resumed his seat, his face was impassive.

"I heard no shots," Wen Wu Yang said. "You were successful."

"Yes."

"It remains then to plan the new

undertaking, the removal of Kin Fo Shoo's pigtail," said Yang. "Again, I would prefer that it be done by an Occidental. I would not like one of our people to have a hand in it."

Ah Sing and Loo Chun nodded agreement.

"It will be necessary to get somebody into close proximity to Kin Fo Shoo. Into intimate proximity, I would say. And if the thing is done by trickery rather than force, the ridicule will be so much the greater. These considerations indicate that a woman will be our best tool. A young and pretty woman."

"You are wise, Wen Wu Yang," Loo Chun said.

"Kin Fo Shoo still has a taste for pretty girls," Wen Wu Yang said. "It is known. Few girls come his way. These are not the days when one could purchase a concubine. And Kin Fo Shoo is too old and dignified to seek women."

"Yes," said Loo Chun. "It should be easy to beguile him with a young and pretty girl. If his wife will permit."

"His wife will permit," said Wen Wu Yang. "She is an old, sharp-tongued woman, but dutiful. She realizes that she gives him little joy these days. She will permit . . . Ah Sing, you handled your other assignment well. You will take on this one too. Find a woman. Make all the arrangements. Kin Fo Shoo must lose his pigtail."

Ah Sing bowed again, flattered and content that Wen Wu Yang had

given him the job, aware of a touch of envy in Loo Chun's eyes.

The girl was blonde and shapely. She was so desirable that it made Ah Sing's head swim to look at her and his breath catch when he talked to her. He had difficulty in maintaining a calm and businesslike attitude.

"This will cost you," the girl said. Her voice was low and feminine, but with a throaty, knowing timbre that bothered Ah Sing. Her name was Edie. "An old Chinaman, huh? No hard feelings, but that's not exactly my type. I'd want at least five hundred to spend a night with him."

"We are willing to pay more than that." Ah Sing hesitated. "Say eight hundred dollars. But there is something else that must be done. A little thing."

"Oh, there's a catch, is there? What is it?"

"Only a little thing. While he sleeps, you must cut off his pigtail."

The girl stared at him unbelievably.

"Only to cut off his pigtail," repeated Ah Sing nervously. "A little thing. You need not fear him. He is a mild and law-abiding old man. He may shout when he finds out, but more likely he will only cry."

"Well," said the girl, "this is beyond me, but I suppose you have your reasons. If you're willing to pay me eight hundred, I'll take it."

"Good. Do not forget to pack a

pair of scissors in your overnight case."

Ah Sing's face did not betray his nervousness when he rang the bell of Kin Fo Shoo's residence. The girl stood beside him, cool and lovely, glancing curiously about.

A servant answered. "We would speak to Kin Fo Shoo," Ah Sing said. "If he is free."

The servant bowed them in to a tiny waiting room, furnished with complementing extremes of fragility and mass, delicate and heavy coloring, and disappeared. When he returned, he led them into the aromatic and puzzling recesses of the house to a larger room decorated in soft and heavy materials that bore the patterns of the East. It was a room that Kin Fo Shoo's ancestors might have lived in.

A door opened silently and Kin Fo Shoo entered. His spare, stooped form was enveloped in the folds of a silky, dark blue robe. His arms were hidden inside the capacious sleeves and his feet shuffled in slippers. His grizzled pigtail emerged neatly from under his skull-cap. He bowed. "I am honored."

"Beloved kinsman," said Ah Sing, speaking Chinese. "I hope that you are well."

"This poor body matters not," said Kin Fo Shoo, bowing again. "Please sit down."

The servant appeared again, bringing tea. They sat and drank and Ah Sing exchanged the slow,

formal trivialities with Kin Fo Shoo that good manners required.

At last Ah Sing said, "Honored sir, I am the bearer of a gift."

"So?" said Kin Fo Shoo politely, his oblate, sleepy eyes not changing.

"It is from members of the tong. We fear that your wife does not give you much joy these days."

"She is good and dutiful," Kin Fo Shoo replied, unblinkingly.

"It is not to be doubted. But I speak of joy. If this girl pleases you, please accept her to-night."

Kin Fo Shoo's eyes still did not change, outwardly, but it seemed as though a small shutter opened and closed somewhere inside. The tip of his tongue peeped out from beneath his flaccid mustache and retreated. He looked at the girl for long moments. Finally he said, indifferently, "She is not ill appearing."

"She is exquisite," said Ah Sing.

"Yes, I see that she is," agreed Kin Fo Shoo politely.

"We will be honored if you will take her."

"The tong is thoughtful," Kin Fo Shoo said. "I do not deserve such consideration."

"It is little enough. Bestow upon us the favor of accepting our humble gift."

Kin Fo Shoo eyed the girl and the tip of his tongue flicked out again. "I must ask my wife," he said.

"But, of course."

"I will do it now. Pardon."

Ah Sing inclined his head gravely, inwardly elated that the old man had risen to the bait. Kin Fo Shoo left the room. When he returned, he said with dignity, "My wife permits. I thank you. I would know which members of the tong have been so kind to an old man. Have you a list?"

"Yes," said Ah Sing. "A list is being prepared. It will be formally presented to you."

"Very well. I will then formally present my gratitude."

Both men bowed.

Kin Fo Shoo said, "The girl may remain now?"

"Yes," Ah Sing said. "Or she will return later or on another night if you are not ready."

The old man's eyes blinked, once. "I am ready," he said. "Let her remain."

"Her name is Edie," Ah Sing said. "She will treat you well." He met Edie's eyes in a meaning look that asked if she understood her instructions. Her answering glance reassured him. She was in control of the situation. She knew what to do. After all, men were her business. She would handle this one old man expertly. Her mission accomplished, she would steal out through the sleeping house, or if necessary face him down. No, she would have no trouble with a broken-spirited old man.

Ah Sing rose, made his farewells and left. . . .

"The deed has been done," Ah Sing said the following evening to Loo Chun and Wen Wu Yang in the tea-house. "I am sure of it. The girl is capable."

"Then why have we not yet heard news of it? Why have there not been lamentations from the house of Kin Fo Shoo? Why have his servants not talked in the market-place? Why are Mrs. Shoo's cousins, normally so free with gossip, silent about this? Why is not all Chinatown laughing that Kin Fo Shoo's pigtail has been cut from him while he snored after dalliance like an old fool?" It was Loo Chun who put these questions.

"Patience," said Wen Wu Yang. "Was not the girl to come here tonight?"

"Yes," Ah Sing said. "To get paid. She has only received a portion of her money."

"That is well," Wen Wu Yang said. "Is she to bring the pigtail?"

"She is."

"That is also well. It will be our proof, in the event that Kin Fo Shoo is deliberately withholding the news that he has lost his pigtail." Wen Wu Yang's face took on a faint frown. "Although I would not think that Kin Fo Shoo would do this. He does not conceal the truth. If he were no longer worthy to lead the tong because of loss of face, it would be like him to admit it at once, rather than delay and hide. Ah Sing, when do you expect the girl?"

Ah Sing hesitated. "She was to have met me here an hour ago."

Loo Chun pursed his lips. Wen Wu Yang rubbed his nose. "She is late," Yang said quietly.

"Yes."

"Can you get in touch with her?"

"I have a phone number."

A half-hour later, Wen Wu Yang said, "Telephone her, Ah Sing."

Ah Sing went to the telephone booth.

The voice that answered his ring was hers. "You were to have met me," Ah Sing reproved gently.

Her voice was unsteady. "I . . . I'm sorry. But you don't owe me anything."

Ah Sing knew. He felt suddenly depressed. "What happened?"

"I . . . couldn't."

"And why?"

"He was so good. And gentle. His courtesy was . . . wonderful. I have never had courtesy like that from a man. He treated me like a delicate blossom. His peach petal, he called me." She laughed nervously. "Me. Tough shelled Edie. He was grave and tender and I crumbled. I went soft. I'm sorry."

There was a silence. "This is hard to believe," Ah Sing said.

"Oh, I tried. I made an agreement and I meant to stick by it. Old as he is, I don't know when any man has pleased me so much in bed, but after he let me go and went to sleep, I quietly got out of bed and took the scissors from my overnight case. I sat on the edge of the bed,

looking down at him. The room was dim, but not dark. I could make out his features.

"One snip, and I would have had that pigtail. I meant to do it. But a ray of moonlight crossed his face, and in that instant he looked so pathetic and sweet and, well, just good, that I couldn't. It seemed like an awful thing to do to the old man. Like I'd be destroying something fine and precious instead of just cutting off some hair. That's it."

"So you failed," Ah Sing said. "All right."

There was another small silence. "There's something else I ought to tell you," the girl said. "I think he would have stopped me anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Just as I decided not to do it, his eyes opened and looked deeply at me. Without surprise, even when they took in the scissors I was holding. 'My little peach petal,' he whispered. 'She will not harm me'. Then he closed his eyes and seemed to go to sleep again, as though in perfect trust. I put the scissors back and got into bed again. There was nothing else to do."

Ah Sing felt as though two hands clapped inside his head. "You mean he was prepared?" he questioned. "He suspected?"

"I don't know more than I've told you. He didn't say anything about it in the morning, and I wasn't going to bring up the subject. He sent me away with a lovely gift."

"That's fine," Ah Sing said. "That's just wonderful. Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Good-bye." He hung up.

"Yes?" Wen Wu Yang said when he returned.

Ah Sing shook his head. "She failed. And I think that Wen Wu Yang knows something." He told them what the girl had said.

"Well," Wen Wu Yang said. "If he knew nothing before, he certainly must be warned now after seeing the girl lean over him with a pair of scissors. A nicely botched up job."

Ah Sing lowered his head in humiliation.

A teen-age youth entered the shop and looked around. "Oh, there you are," he said. "I got a message from Kin Fo Shoo. He wants to see you guys. Sing, Chun and Yang. All you guys."

"All right," Wen Wu Yang said. "We have the message. Go, now."

The boy left, whistling.

"I do not like this," Loo Chun said.

"He knows something, but how much?" Wen Wu Yang mused.

"A-a-ah," Ah Sing said with abrupt impatience. "He is only a harmless old man. A weak obstacle, after all. We make too much out of this. Let us go and see him and listen to what he has to say. If he gives us trouble, we will tell him outright that we want him to step out of the way, that the world has passed him by and his old-fash-

ioned principles are holding back the tong. If he refuses . . . we will know what to do."

"You are right," said Wen Wu Yang. "Let us face him. One way or another . . . he must go."

But when the brave words had been spoken, the three eyed each other hesitantly. So ingrained was the respect for a tong elder, that Ah Sing felt a deep fear at the thought of meeting the sleepy, wise old eyes. Nevertheless, the thing must be settled. The rich plunder of the rackets was waiting.

"Please sit down," Kin Fo Shoo said politely. Ill at ease, the three took seats. Kin Fo Shoo settled into a hard chair facing them. "These," he said to Ah Sing, "are the other members of the tong who were so concerned with my . . . welfare . . . as to present me with that lovely gift?"

"Everybody in the tong is concerned with your welfare, honored sir," Ah Sing replied evasively.

Kin Fo Shoo did not press the point. "I do not go out much," he said softly. "But much information comes to me here. I have learned that you three, and some others, hold a certain viewpoint. But that you three are the torches that lead. Is this correct?"

"Yes, Kin Fo Shoo," Wen Wu Yang said, his high voice taking on a hard note. "It must be said now.

You have outlived your usefulness to the tong. The tong must travel a new path. You cannot lead there. Step aside."

"You are brutal, Yang," the old man reproved gently. "But clear. You are next in succession."

"Yes."

Kin Fo Shoo's eyes almost closed, so that he seemed to drowse. The room grew quiet. At last he said, "I wondered what you meant the girl to do to me. I found out. It was quite clever . . . and shameless." His eyes opened. "But she was lovely." He smiled. "Her skin was delicate as a peach blossom. Her spirit was tender. I thank you for her."

"You may have her again," Yang said. "But you must step aside for the good of the tong."

"Why didn't you kill me?" Kin Fo Shoo asked abruptly.

Taken aback, the three sat dumbly, unable to answer.

Kin Fo Shoo smiled. "I will tell you," he said. "You knew that you were doing wrong. This consciousness made you hesitant and uncertain, when you should have struck quickly."

Kin Fo Shoo made a rapid motion. From the folds of his sleeves, he produced a small, gleaming revolver.

"I, however," he said, "know that I am doing right."

Kin Fo Shoo fired three shots.



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It was the second time Cherry Graves' jewels had been stolen. Of course everyone wanted to help. Cherry was the patron saint of reward-seekers.

Reward

A Novelette

BY RICHARD DEMING

KEVIN SLATER had been the night house detective at the Hotel Cavanaugh for ten years. He was a lean, trim-muscled man of fifty-five with graying hair and a sharp-featured, aristocratic face. He had the appearance of a successful business executive, but he looked more distinguished than he really was. He had once been a small-town policeman and he had once worked for a private detective agency, and his present job paid the highest salary he had ever earned: ninety dollars a week.

James Turner had been the night desk clerk at the Cavanaugh for ten minutes, having just started his first tour of duty at eleven P.M. He was a plump, amiable young man



of twenty-five with a pleasant smile and the deferential air of hotel clerks everywhere. He had a degree in hotel management and had just finished a two-week training course conducted by the hotel itself. As a matter of fact he was still in training, since his stint as night clerk was merely part of the management's program of grooming bright young men for better things. Eventually, providing he showed promise, he was slated for a job as assistant manager.

Turner had learned his job well so far. He knew the physical layout of the hotel thoroughly, he knew all the house rules and regulations, he knew the answers to virtually any questions a guest might ask, and he knew what action to take in most emergencies. He also knew what action to take in emergencies beyond him: phone the manager.

He was about as well prepared to assume his new post as it was possible to be without actual experience. But there are some things you can't learn in either college classrooms or training sessions. Kevin Slater was briefing him on the idiosyncrasies of the current crop of guests, and the new night clerk was listening gratefully.

Slater said, "Now old Mr. Porter in seven twenty-four always phones the desk instead of room service to place orders. He'll get mad if you try to refer him to room service. He'll phone down about midnight to order breakfast delivered at seven

A.M. But if you send it to his room then, he'll raise hell, because he won't be up yet. At seven phone his room and ask if he's ready. He'll tell you to hold it for twenty minutes. Then you ask if there are any changes in the order, and he'll switch it from bacon and eggs to a sweet roll and coffee. He's always got a bigger appetite when he orders at night than when he wakes up in the morning."

James Turner grinned. "I've got it."

The house detective glanced at the clock behind the desk. It said 11:10. "In the next few minutes Cherry Graves will come in trailed by her chauffeur-bodyguard. She never hits bed later than eleven thirty. Says she needs her beauty sleep."

The clerk's eyebrows raised. "Cherry Graves the actress? Is she staying here?"

"In the penthouse. She's been vacationing here between Broadway shows for years."

"I thought she was supposed to despise Hollywood," Turner said.

"Only the movie industry. They've been after her for years to do a picture, but she won't desert the legitimate stage. She likes Hollywood's social life, though. She's another one you should know about. She goes around wearing about a quarter-million-dollars-worth of jewelry. A diamond necklace worth about a hundred and fifty grand, a diamond bracelet

worth about seventy-five, and about twenty-five-thousand-bucks-worth of rings and earrings. She had it all stolen once, so she's careful of it. When she's got it on, her chauffeur-bodyguard is always with her. He's in room six twelve, incidentally. His name's Larry Stone. When she hasn't got it on, we keep it in the hotel safe."

James Turner said, "You say it was stolen once? Not here?"

"In New York City about three years back. She just kept the stuff in a drawer and her home was burglarized. It made her sorer than hell, because she thinks more of those gewgaws than most women do of their children. The stuff was insured, but she offered a personal reward of twenty-five grand for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the thief. That was on top of a ten-grand reward offered by the insurance company for recovery of the jewels. The jewels were recovered, probably through some undercover deal where the insurance company paid the reward with no questions asked, but the thief was never caught. She doesn't leave them in unlocked drawers any more."

"She'll leave them here at the desk when she comes in?"

The house detective shook his head. "She thinks that would be like partially undressing in public. She's a kind of screwy Jame. When she comes in with her chauffeur-bodyguard, they'll head straight for

an elevator. It's my business to get myself on the same elevator. Larry Stone will get off on the sixth floor. I'll continue on up to the penthouse and wait in the front room while she takes off the jewels in the bedroom. She'll bring them out in their case, and I'll bring them downstairs to go into the safe. Next time she wants to wear them, she'll phone down about fifteen minutes before she's ready to go out, I'll take them up, wait until she has put them on and accompany her down to the lobby. Larry Stone will meet us here and take over. We've been going through this routine every time she's stayed here for the last three years."

"This is a nightly event?"

"Oh, no. She only wears the stones when she goes to a night club or somewhere else public. A couple of times a week, maybe. And she always either wears the whole kaboodle or nothing. She's got them on tonight, though. I suppose she went night clubbing."

The front revolving door spun at that moment, and the house detective glanced that way. "Here they come," he announced.

The woman who entered first was a stunning brunette with a lissome figure encased in a low-cut black evening gown. A glittering diamond choker encircled her slim throat, another band of diamonds gleamed at her left wrist and three diamond rings glinted on her right hand. She also wore diamond ear-

rings. Behind her came a wide-shouldered, well-muscled man over six feet tall dressed in a dark business suit and carrying a chauffeur's cap in his hand.

"Boy, she's beautiful!" the desk clerk breathed. "And she doesn't look over twenty-one."

"Beauty treatment and massage," Kevin Slater said out of the corner of his mouth. "She's thirty-eight."

He moved in the direction of the elevators and waited unobtrusively to one side of the elevator bank. There were three elevators, but at this time of night only two were in operation. When the Broadway star and her companion chose one of the cars, Slater stepped forward and entered the car too.

As the operator closed the elevator door, Cherry Graves threw the house detective a dazzling smile and said, "Evening, Mr. Slater."

"Evening, Miss Graves, Hi, Larry."

The chauffeur-bodyguard nodded. "How are you, Kevin?"

There was no further conversation. The car stopped at the sixth floor to let Larry Stone off.

"Good-night, Miss Graves," he said. "Night, Kevin."

They both bade him good-night, the car door closed and the cage moved upward to the eleventh and top floor. Cherry Graves and Slater got off and crossed the hall to a narrow sliding door. The house detective slid aside the door to dis-

close the cage of a small, four-passenger-capacity self-operating elevator. This took them the last flight up to the roof and delivered them into a tiny, closet-sized foyer. The actress took a key from her bag, opened the penthouse door and led the way into a wide, elaborately furnished front room. She continued on into a bedroom while the house detective quietly waited.

In a few moments the woman returned, no longer wearing her jewels, but carrying a flat leather jewel case about the size of the average library book. Handing it to the house detective, she said with another of her dazzling smiles, "Good-night, Mr. Slater."

"Good-night, Miss Graves."

He set the spring lock as he went out, so that the door automatically locked when he pulled it shut behind him. Entering the small elevator cage, he pushed the down button.

At twenty minutes to midnight desk clerk James Turner began to worry about Kevin Slater not returning. By ten of twelve he had a bad case of the jitters, for the house detective had now been gone thirty-five minutes.

Remembering Slater's comment that Cherry Graves never went to bed later than eleven thirty, he was afraid to disturb her by phoning the penthouse. It was possible, of course, that Slater hadn't told him everything there was to know

about the Broadway actress. Kevin Slater was a handsome, well-built man, even though he was in his fifties. Perhaps only part of the reason she had him accompany her upstairs was to carry her jewels back down to the safe. You could never tell about these show-business women. He had heard that some of them were real pigs.

At five minutes of twelve he decided he had to take some action. Calling over the bell captain, he put him in charge of the desk and took an elevator to the eleventh floor. No one was in sight in the hall when he got off. The elevator door closed and the operator took the cage down again before it occurred to Turner that he should have instructed the man to wait.

Crossing to the penthouse elevator, he pushed back the sliding door. He stared into the small cage in horror.

Kevin Slater lay flat on his stomach. His wrists were tightly taped behind his back with adhesive tape, his ankles were similarly taped together, then his ankles had been taped to his wrists to effectively hogtie him. More tape had been plastered across his mouth so that the house detective could make only grunting noises.

For a few moments Turner fumbled with the bonds, but quickly realized it would take some time to unwind all the tape that had been used. It would be quicker to cut it. He started to reach for the

gag, then hesitated, afraid that he might pull some facial skin off along with the tape. Since he didn't carry a pocket knife, he re-crossed the hall and punched the signal buttons of both cars which were in operation. According to the indicators, both cars were standing idle at the main floor. He watched the arrows impatiently as both simultaneously rose toward eleven.

The two car doors opened at the same time. Turner was thankful to see there was no one on either elevator except the operator.

"Do either of you men carry a pocket knife?" he asked.

Both stared at him wonderingly. Then one shook his head and the other said, "I do, sir." At the same moment his gaze fell on the open elevator door across the hall and his eyes bugged out.

"Cut Mister Slater loose from that tape," Turner instructed crisply. "Better let him handle the gag himself, or you may pull part of his face off with the tape. Then bring him downstairs."

Entering the other elevator, he said, "Down."

As the car descended at top speed, the operator asked, "What happened, Mr. Turner?"

"We'll know when Mr. Slater gets downstairs," the desk clerk said in the same crisp tone. "Meantime, don't mention the incident to any guests who happen to take your car."

The operator nodded obedience.

As a result of his training, James Turner knew exactly what to do when he got back to the desk. He phoned the manager.

CHAPTER II

By Los Angeles standards it was a dull Monday morning. The sun was shining, but a medium smog gave the atmosphere a sickly gray cast.

A woman was waiting in the hallway outside Matt Gannon's Figueroa Street office when he arrived at nine A.M. An attractive blonde in her late twenties, she wore a light knitted suit which fitted tightly enough to outline in detail an excellently-formed body. She was more than merely pretty, but she just missed beauty because she was over made up, including purple eye shadow, which might have added glamour under soft lights, but only made her face seem a trifle harsh in broad daylight. She looked as though she had been crying.

"Is something the matter?" the private detective asked sympathetically.

She looked puzzled, then her face cleared and she dabbed at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "You mean because I'm crying? It's only the smog. I'm one of those unfortunates it affects."

This tended to increase rather than decrease his sympathy. Aside from causing them to grumble,

smog has little effect on most Los Angelians. But to those allergic to the fumes, it can cause varying degrees of eye irritation. Gannon happened to be immune, but he always felt a tug of sympathy when he saw people weeping on the streets.

As he slipped his key into the door, the woman asked, "Are you Mr. Gannon?"

"Uh-huh," he said. Leading the way into his office, he pointed to a chair in front of the desk, rounded the desk and seated himself.

The woman took a quick glance around before carefully seating herself. She didn't seem enormously impressed by the office. It was little more than a cubbyhole of a place and the cumbersome, oversized desk made it seem smaller than it actually was, but it was clean and neat and adequately furnished.

She said, "My name is Connie Stewart." She took a package of cigarettes from a white kid bag. "Do you mind if I smoke, Mr. Gannon?"

"Go ahead." Producing a lighter, he leaned across the desk to furnish a light, pushed an ash tray near her and then sank back into his swivel chair. Working a cigarette from his own pack without removing the pack from his pocket, he put it in his mouth and lit it too.

Connie Stewart obviously had used the cigarette as a delaying tactic in order to give her time to study the detective, for after blowing out one thin stream of smoke,

she leaned forward and butted it in the ash tray. Then, after staring for a moment at the sun-bleached forelock which tumbled across Gannon's forehead, she said, "I suppose you've been following the jewel robbery that took place at the Cavanaugh a couple of weeks back."

"I've been reading about it. I haven't been retained in the case."

"Have you seen today's paper?"

"Yes, but I didn't notice any new developments."

"There haven't been any toward a solution. But the insurance company has offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward for recovery of the jewels, and Cherry Graves has offered twenty-five thousand for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the thief."

Gannon nodded. "I saw that. I understand both made the same offers when the same jewels were stolen in New York City some years back."

"That's right. Only last time only the insurance company had to pay off, because they got the jewels back but never arrested the thief. This time I think both rewards may be paid. I think I know who pulled the job."

Gannon hiked his eyebrows. "Why haven't you reported it to the police?"

She gave him a cynical smile. "I'm not splitting the rewards with some cop. Or maybe have him grab the whole thing and cut me out."

Gannon frowned. "The police in this town don't operate that way, Miss Stewart. They wouldn't cheat you out of any rewards due you."

She shrugged. "You can trust cops if you want to. I don't. But I hear you're honest. I inquired around about you, and everybody says you give your clients a fair shake. That's why I came to you. I want you to handle this for me and make sure I get the full rewards."

Gannon said dryly, "I'm flattered. Just what information do you have?"

"Shouldn't we first settle your fee? I suppose you'll want a percentage of the take. But I'm telling you right now, I won't go for something like ten percent. That would be thirty-five hundred clams. I might be willing to pay two and a half percent."

Amused, Gannon said. "I charge a standard per-day fee, Miss Stewart. You'll be charged only according to the time I have to devote to your interest."

She looked surprised. "You won't want a percentage?"

He shook his head. "Of course my fee will be the same whether you collect the rewards or not. Whatever information you have may prove valueless."

"I hardly think so," she said. "Look at this."

Opening her bag, she removed a glittering diamond ring and held it across the desk. Gannon punched

out his cigarette before taking it from her hand.

It was a white-gold cocktail ring set with five emerald-cut diamonds. The center one, of about two carats, was square. Surrounding it were four slim baguettes of about a half carat each.

Gannon looked up inquiringly.

She asked, "Do you recall the descriptions of the jewelry when the robbery was first reported?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't following the case that closely."

"Neither was I until last night. Then I got a hunch and looked through back issues of the paper. There was a diamond choker, a diamond bracelet, a pair of earrings and three finger rings. They were all described in detail. This exactly matches the description of one of the rings."

"Hmm. Where'd you get it?"

"A gift from my boy friend. We'd had a fight and I wasn't speaking to him. Last night he brought this around as a peace offering. Only he told me not to wear it until we went on our trip. He's been promising to take me to Acapulco. After he left, I got suspicious and started looking through old newspapers. When I found the descriptions of the stolen gems, I understood why he wanted me to keep the ring out of sight until we were out of the country."

Gannon thoughtfully pushed back his hanging forelock. It immediately fell back in place again.

"He give any indication of where he got it?"

"No. I assumed he'd bought it until I checked the old papers. Then I knew he'd pulled that robbery."

"Just because he had this ring? Or do you have some other reason to be so certain?"

"See what you think," she said. "For weeks he's been pulling the line that he had a big deal of some kind cooking, and as soon as it broke, he'd outfit me with all new clothes and take me vacationing to Acapulco. Meantime he hadn't spent a nickel on me for months, which is the reason we've been having fights. I've been getting tired and tired of waiting for the big day. The day after the robbery he told me the deal had finally gone through, and now it was only a matter of collecting the money. He said he should have it by the latest in another month. That's when I blew my top. 'Another month,' I said. 'If you think I'm having parlor dates in my own parlor for another month, with me buying all the hooch, think again. There's other men would be glad to spend money on me.' I told him to get lost until the money was in his hands."

Gannon grinned slightly. "This was the argument he tried to patch up by giving you the ring?"

"He did patch it up, until I realized where he'd got it. Ever since I told him off, I haven't let him in

my apartment and I wouldn't talk to him on the phone. So last night he come over—early this morning, rather; about three A.M. I work nights and don't get home until two thirty. I kept the chain on the door and wouldn't let him in until he held up the ring. Then, naturally, I flipped and let him in. We had a big reconciliation."

"Didn't you ask where he got the ring?"

"I assumed he'd been paid off on the deal he'd been talking about, and had bought it. I never even thought of the Cherry Graves robbery until he'd left. Then, while I was admiring it all by myself, it registered that I'd seen a ring just like it described somewhere. So I went out in the back hall, where I stack old papers, and started looking. Sure enough, it was one of Cherry Graves's rings."

Gannon asked, "What's this man's name?"

"Sam Carson. Don't ask me what he does, because he's never done anything since I've known him except play the horses whenever he can scrounge a few bucks."

"How long have you known him?"

"Three, four months. I stuck with him because he was always conning me with talk of this big deal that was supposed to change everything and put him in the chips. I might have known it was something crooked, but I guess I've got rocks in my head."

"Have you mentioned your suspicion to him?"

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him since he walked out about six this morning, and I'm not about to."

Gannon asked curiously, "If Carson is your boy friend, why are you turning him in?"

"I fell out of love the minute I realized he was a heist artist. I don't want any guy in my life who I'm likely to have to wait years for while he's making gravel out of rock piles. I'd rather have the thirty-five grand. With that I could quit my job and open up some nice little business like a dress shop in Pasadena or Santa Monica. Somewhere far enough from downtown Los Angeles for the smog to be thinner." Delicately she touched the tiny handkerchief to her eyes.

"What is your job?" Gannon asked.

"I'm in the chorus line at the Purple Goose."

The private detective drew a memo pad before him and picked up a pencil. "Where's this Sam Carson live?"

She gave him the number of a rooming house on Franklin Avenue in the Hollywood District. After writing it down, Gannon asked the woman her own address. She had a small apartment on Hollywood Boulevard. Jotting down the number beneath the other address, he tore off the sheet and put it in his pocket.

Picking up his desk phone, he dialed the number of his answering service. There had been no calls for him over the weekend, the switchboard operator informed him.

"I'll be out of the office for a couple of hours," he said. "I'll check in as soon as I get back."

Hanging up, he rose from his chair and said to the blonde, "Let's go."

She looked surprised. "Go where?"

"To relay this information to the police and make sure you get your rewards if anything comes of it."

He waited until she had risen from her chair, then held the door open for her to precede him into the hallway.

CHAPTER III

On the third floor of the police building Gannon led the way down the hall to the Robbery Division squadroom. At the desk he asked who was currently in charge of the Markets and Jewel Robberies Detail.

"Clark," the desk sergeant said, peering around the room for the designated officer.

"I see him," Gannon said, spotting the lanky figure of Sergeant Gil Clark hunched over a case record in the far corner.

With an average of nine robberies a day in Los Angeles, the Robbery Division squadroom is always in a state of bedlam. At one table a team

of officers was questioning a pair of handcuffed suspects. At another a detective was taking down information from a fat man who kept rubbing a bump on the back of his head. At a third two officers were struggling over the writeup of a case. Other teams of officers were hurrying in or out of the squadroom on various missions. And above the general babble of voices the voice of a communications man droned from the hot-shot speaker, reporting new complaints and adding information concerning complaints previously reported.

Gannon and Connie Stewart worked their ways through the mob to the corner where Gil Stewart sat. The thin detective raised his head from the manila folder he was studying, grinned when he recognized Gannon and waved to chairs across the table from him.

After introducing Connie Stewart to the detective, Gannon asked, "How you coming on the Cherry Graves Robbery, Gil?"

The sergeant's grin faded. "We're not. That was a professional job, thoroughly cased. If we had any kind of decent description, we'd have something to go on. But the guy was of average height, average build, and we don't know what his face looked like because he wore that damned woman's stocking pulled over his head."

Gannon said to the blonde, "What kind of build does this Carson have?"

"Average," the woman said. "Around one sixty, five feet nine."

"Who's Carson?" Gil Clark asked.

Gannon said, "Miss Stewart thinks she knows who pulled the job. She's claiming both rewards if she's right." He took the ring from his pocket and laid it on the table.

Picking it up, the sergeant examined it, then stared at Gannon in surprise. "This is part of the loot. Where'd you get it?"

"From Miss Stewart. She got it as a gift from a man named Sam Carson. I'll let her tell you about it."

The sergeant listened attentively as the blonde repeated the story she had told Gannon earlier that morning.

When she finished, Clark asked, "Where's this guy live?"

"In a rooming house on Franklin Avenue," Gannon said. Pulling the memo sheet from his pocket, he read off the address.

Jotting it down, the sergeant rose from his chair. "Let's go, Matt. Do you have a car, Miss Stewart?"

"It's parked on Figueroa Street in front of Mr. Gannon's office."

"Then we'll drop you off there," Clark said.

They all went in Gannon's car. When they dropped the woman off, she said, "I'll get the rewards, won't I?"

Clark said politely, "If Carson turns out to be the thief and we recover the rest of the loot. We'll let you know."

It was past eleven A.M. when Gannon and Clark reached the rooming house on Franklin. It was an ancient brick three-story building with a sign in a lower window reading: ROOMS FOR RENT. Gannon parked across the street.

Crossing the street, they mounted steps and rang a doorbell. A plump, middle-aged woman answered the door.

Showing his I.D., the robbery officer said, "My name is Clark and this is Mr. Gannon. You the landlady here?"

"Yes, sir," she said, wide-eyed. "What is it?"

"You got a roomer named Sam Carson?"

"Yes, sir. Second floor front." "He in?"

"I think so. I haven't heard him go out today. He rarely does before evening." She stepped aside. "Come in."

Clark moved inside with Gannon following him. "Second floor front, you say?"

"Yes, sir," she said worriedly. "Has Mr. Carson done something wrong?"

"We just want to talk to him," Clark said noncommittally. "You got a pass key?"

Nervously the woman produced a pass key from her apron pocket. "This fits all the doors."

Clark took it from her hand. "You better wait down here," he advised her.

He quietly went up the stairs

with Gannon right behind him. The landlady remained at the bottom of the stairs, staring after them with a frightened expression on her face.

At the top of the stairs Clark paused to glance both ways along the hall, then nodded toward a closed door at the front and said in a low voice, "I guess that's it. We know he's got a gun because he used it in the heist, so we won't take any chances."

Producing a snub-nosed thirty-eight revolver, Clark moved cautiously toward the door. Gannon moved soundlessly behind him.

At the door Clark stood for a moment listening, then gently tried the knob. The door was locked. Quietly he slid the key into the lock, but didn't turn it. Instead he motioned Gannon forward.

Gannon had worked enough with the Los Angeles police to know all their routine procedures by heart. The standard technique for entering a room where the occupant might be waiting with a gun in his hand was for one officer to kick the door open and get out of the line of fire fast, while the other charged in with his gun leveled. Clark was offering him the less dangerous assignment.

Stepping forward, Gannon grasped the key with one hand, the knob with the other, and simultaneously turned both. Raising one foot, he kicked the door back against the wall and hurled himself

to one side out of Clark's way. Instantly Clark was inside the room.

The robbery officer came to an abrupt halt just inside the door and slowly thrust his gun back into its holster. Peering past him, Gannon saw that there hadn't been any need for caution after all.

A slender man in his thirties sat in an easy chair by the window staring sightlessly straight in front of himself. A pillow was pressed to his chest and there was a singed spot on it just in front of his heart. His hands lay in his lap and one of them held a thirty-eight automatic.

As Gannon moved into the room, Clark growled, "I'll be damned. If it isn't Top-Price Eddie Case. I didn't even know he was in these parts."

"Who's Top-Price Eddie Case?" Gannon asked.

"A lot of things," Clark said, moving closer to study the body. "Heist artist, burglar, safe cracker. It would take a volume to list his whole record. But he got his nickname for his ability to get top prices from fences. He was so good, other heist artists used to cut him in on jobs they pulled just to dispose of the loot."

Gannon was frowning down at the dead man. "You buying it as suicide, Gil?"

The police officer glanced at him. "It certainly looks like it. And the door was locked."

Turning, Gannon walked back

to the door and examined the lock. "Spring lock," he announced. "Pulling it shut from outside would automatically lock the door. Why should he suicide? According to Connie Stewart, he was happy as a lark when he left her place at six this morning. I'll bet you won't find any jewels here."

But he was wrong. They found the jewel case containing all the missing items except the already-recovered ring standing in plain sight on top of the dresser. Gil Clark didn't make any comment when he opened the case and saw the jewelry. He merely closed it again, dropped it in his pocket and grinned at Gannon.

"All right," Gannon conceded. "I guess he wasn't killed for the jewels."

Together they searched the room and found one more interesting thing. In a dresser drawer Gannon turned up the top half of a woman's nylon stocking, knotted at the smaller end.

When he held it up, Clark said, "The stocking mask he wore when he pulled the job." He took it from Gannon's hand and put it in a different pocket.

That seemed to be all there was of interest in the room. They left the body as they found it, relocked the door and went back downstairs. Clark phoned Homicide to report the crime, then started questioning the landlady while they waited for a homicide team to ar-

rive. His first question was whether the man she knew as Sam Carson had received any visitors that morning.

"Not that I know," she said. "It heard him come in about six thirty A.M. and go straight to his room. Later I heard other tenants come down the steps, but I don't remember hearing anyone go up."

"Do you keep your front door locked?" Gannon asked.

"At night, I take it off the latch at eight in the morning, so the tenants don't have to bother taking out their keys in the daytime."

"So someone *could* have come in without your knowing it at any time after eight A.M.?"

"It's possible," she admitted. "I was in my kitchen most of the morning, and I can't see the front door from there."

Clark asked, "What are you getting at, Matt? If this was murder and it had any connection with the robbery, we wouldn't have found the jewels still there."

"Just trying to cover all the angles," Gannon murmured. "You need me any more, Gil?"

Clark looked surprised. "You're my transportation."

"There'll be enough cop cars around here to transport a regiment before long. Can't you catch a ride?"

Clark shrugged. "I guess. Go ahead and take off. I'll phone you if the Homicide boys want to talk to you."

Gannon left and drove back to his office.

CHAPTER IV

The next morning Gannon's phone was ringing when he entered his office. It was Sergeant Gil Clark.

"We're closing the Cherry Graves case," he said. "We're satisfied that Eddie Case pulled the job, and Homicide is satisfied that his death was suicide."

"Who's the Homicide team?" Gannon asked.

"Gloff and Lennox."

Lieutenant Harry Gloff and Sergeant Bert Lennox were an efficient team. Gannon had particular respect for Harry Gloff's judgment. But it seemed to him a rather snap decision.

"What do they base their opinion on?" he asked dubiously.

"The coroner's office places his death at somewhere between eight and eleven A.M. There's no indication that it wasn't suicide. The angle of the bullet was okay, and there was no sign of violence in the room. He just sat there, put a pillow across his chest to muffle the shot, and pulled the trigger."

"Why would a suicide care about muffling the shot?" Gannon inquired. "I never heard of a suicide being that considerate of neighbors."

"You don't know the screwy things they do," Clark said. "Maybe

he thought it wouldn't hurt as much through a pillow."

"Did Gloff and Lennox turn up any motive for suicide?"

"Well, he was broke. Maybe he found out he couldn't unload the jewels anywhere and got depressed having all that potential wealth that he couldn't convert to cash."

"I thought you said his specialty was getting top prices from fences."

"I was just giving an example of what might have caused him to go off his rocker," Clark said irritably. "So we haven't got a cut-and-dried motive for suicide. You got one for murder?"

Gannon said, "I'm not that interested. I was just engaged to see that my client got her rewards. Will there be any difficulty there?"

"Shouldn't be with the insurance company. About Cherry Graves, I don't know. Her offer was for information leading to arrest and conviction. Technically she doesn't have to pay a cent for a body."

"Hmm," Gannon said. "That's an angle I hadn't considered. Thanks for calling, Gil."

Breaking the connection, he looked up the number of the Hotel Cavanaugh and dialed it. He had to explain who he was to the hotel switchboard operator before she would ring the penthouse, then there was a wait while the operator presumably inquired of Cherry Graves if she wished to take the call before the connection was completed.

Finally a musical voice said in his ear, "Miss Graves speaking."

"Hello, Miss Graves," Gannon said. "My name is Matthew Gannon."

"I know. The switchboard operator told me. The police mentioned your name last night, when they informed me my jewels had been found. I understand you had a part in their recovery."

"A very small part," he said. "They were recovered on information furnished by my client, Miss Connie Stewart. That's what I'm calling about. Are you going to pay the reward you offered?"

"Well, I talked to my attorney by long-distance to New York last night. I find I'm not legally required to pay. It wasn't a dead-or-alive offer."

"Isn't that just a technicality?"

"I guess it is," she admitted. "Though my attorney says I'd be on sound legal grounds. However, there's the factor of my public image to consider, Mr. Gannon. The public relations idiots I employ have built me up as a particularly generous woman. I'm not sure that the bad publicity I might get from renegeing on the reward might not cost me more than I saved in the long run. I phoned my publicity agent long-distance last night too. He thinks I ought to pay it."

"So whose advice do you plan to take?"

"You may reassure your client, Mr. Gannon. I'm going to pay."

"Good," Gannon said. "Thanks for your time, Miss Graves." He rang off.

At one P.M. Cherry Graves phoned him back. "Are you busy right now, Mr. Gannon?" she inquired.

"Just doing some desk work. Why?"

"Could you stop up to see me?"

"About what?" he asked.

"I'm not sure I'm going to pay that reward after all. Something has come up."

"Oh? What?"

"I'd rather discuss it when you get here," she said. "I also want to retain you to make an investigation. We can discuss both matters when you arrive."

"All right," Gannon agreed. "Expect me in a half hour."

When the private detective arrived at the Hotel Cavanaugh, he found a tall, broad-shouldered man waiting for him at the desk. The man introduced himself as Larry Stone, Cherry Graves's chauffeur, and said he was supposed to show Gannon the way to the penthouse.

They took an elevator to the eleventh floor, crossed the hall and took a small self-operated elevator another flight up to the roof. Stone opened the front door of the penthouse without knocking and led the way into a large front room.

Gannon had never seen Cherry Graves on the stage, but he had seen enough publicity stills of the famous Broadway star to recognize

her instantly. She was seated on a sofa dressed in red and black lounging pajamas and smoking a cigarette in a long jeweled holder. She wasn't wearing any of her recovered jewelry, he noted. Probably it hadn't yet been returned to her.

A pretty, brown-haired woman in her twenties was seated in an easy chair sipping a highball. She had an excellent figure, which she must have been proud of, for she was practically flaunting it in a dress far too tight for her. Like Connie Stewart, she wore a trifle too much makeup, including eyeshadow.

The actress greeted Gannon with a dazzling smile and held out a hand for him to touch. "So nice to meet you in person, Mr. Gannon. This is Miss Helene North."

Gannon lightly clasped the proffered hand, nodded to the brown-haired girl and murmured he was glad to know her. The girl examined the sun-bleached forelock which tumbled across his forehead with such interest, he self-consciously brushed it back with his fingers. As usual, it instantly plopped back in place again.

"Sit down, Mr. Gannon," Cherry said. "Larry, would you get Mr. Gannon a drink? What would you like, Mr. Gannon?"

"Bourbon and water will be fine," Gannon said, seating himself in a chair across from the actress.

"I'll have Scotch," she said to Larry Stone. "Another bourbon

and soda for Miss North, and fix yourself what you want."

The chauffeur headed toward the kitchen.

Gannon said, "Now what is it that's come up, Miss Graves?"

The actress waved her long cigarette holder in the direction of the brown-haired girl. "Miss North can tell you better than I can. She's a friend of your client, Connie Stewart."

Gannon looked at Helene North. The girl said in a slightly sullen voice, "Not a friend. I hate her guts. We just dance in the same line together at the Purple Goose. Sam Carson—or I guess his real name was Eddie Case, according to this morning's paper—didn't pull that jewel job, Mr. Gannon."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"Because he was in my apartment that night from nine P.M. until four in the morning. And the heist was somewhere around eleven thirty."

Gannon's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you danced in the chorus line at the Purple Goose."

"I do."

"Connie Stewart says she gets home at two thirty A.M. How'd you happen to be home all evening?"

"Because the job was pulled on a Monday, and that's our night off. The Purple Goose doesn't have a floor show Monday nights."

Gannon pursed his lips. "All right," he conceded. "How'd Eddie

Case alias Sam Carson happen to be in your apartment all night?"

"He was my boy friend."

Gannon raised his eyebrows. "Connie Stewart claims he was hers."

The girl said loftily, "She had him a while, but he came back to me."

"Hmm. Night before last he was making plans to take her to Acapulco."

Helene North's eyes widened. "He was supposed to take *me* to Acapulco. Why, the two-timing rat! He said he'd just been playing around with her a little for kicks, and I was really his girl."

"That's neither here nor there," Cherry Graves injected pleasantly. "The point is, he couldn't have been the thief if he was with Miss North that night."

"And that kicks Connie out of her reward," Helene said with satisfaction.

Gannon examined the girl in silence. She reddened slightly. "If you're thinking I just made this up to cheat Connie out of her reward, I didn't. I'm glad she won't get it, but I'm telling the truth. Besides, I think I know who the real heister is."

"Who?" Gannon asked.

"Well, Sam—Eddie was awfully thick with Billy Wilde."

"The ex-bookie?"

"Ex-everything. He got himself fouled up with the racket boys, and can't get a part of any organized

racket in town any more. The scutbutt is that he's taken to making a living knocking over filling stations. I warned Sam about him, but he just laughed. I knew Sam had some kind of deal cooking, because that's what was supposed to take us to Acapulco, and I figured it was with Billy."

"Why Billy particularly?"

The girl shrugged. "Billy was the only guy I ever saw him with. Sam preferred to be with girls mostly."

Larry Stone came back, distributed the drinks and quietly seated himself in a corner of the room with a glass in his hand. Gannon sipped his drink and smiled approval at his hostess at the quality of the bourbon.

"Did Carson—Case, rather—ever intimate what the deal was he had cooking?"

"Not specifically. He said he was acting as agent in a big sale of some kind, and it would mean a whopping commission. He never told me what he was supposed to sell, or for who, but it's pretty obvious now. Billy Wilde was having him fence the jewels."

No one said anything for a few moments. Finally Cherry said, "What do you think, Mr. Gannon?"

"I don't know," Gannon said slowly. "Miss North may just be trying to do my client a dirty turn. But if she's telling the truth, it sounds as though Top-Price Eddie Case was only fencing the goods, and the thief is still at large."

"Exactly the way I saw it when Miss North came to me with the story. That's why I want to engage you to re-investigate."

Gannon looked at her.

"I want to be fair to your client," the Broadway star explained. "But at the same time I don't want to pay an undeserved reward. It's possible that Miss North is telling the truth, but it's equally possible she made all this up because she doesn't like Connie Stewart. I want you to find out."

Helene North gave the actress an indignant look, and got one of her dazzling smiles in return. The girl's indignation faded and she looked uncertain whether to voice resentment or not. She finally settled for taking a pull at her drink.

Gannon said, "There's one thing on your side, Miss North. I'd guess Billy Wilde to be about five feet ten and one eighty, which falls in the average build class. Do you know where he lives these days?"

"Sure. In the same rooming house Sam did. I told you they were thicker than fleas."

That was interesting, Gannon thought. Particularly if it turned out that Top-Price Eddie Case had been murdered instead of committing suicide.

He finished his drink and rose to his feet.

"I'll poke around and let you know what I find out," he said to Cherry. "How long do you plan to remain in town?"

"Several more weeks. I have a total of six weeks between engagements. And Mr. Gannon—"

"Yeah?"

She smiled at him. "I inquired about you of the policeman who informed me of my jewels' recovery. He was most complimentary. He says I can have complete faith in your integrity. So I intend to abide completely in your judgment. If you decide that this Sam Carson, or Eddie Case, or whatever his name was, actually was the thief, I'll pay the reward to Miss Stewart without further question. But if this Billy Wilde turns out to be the thief, I suppose Miss North here deserves the reward."

Gannon glanced at the brown-haired girl in time to see a fleeting smile of satisfaction flicker across her face. The thought that she might not only push Connie Stewart out of the reward, but might get it herself, had apparently already occurred to her.

Gannon said, "I suppose. That would be up to you."

Excusing himself, he left the penthouse. As he rode down to eleven in the self-operating elevator, it occurred to him that if he had been a lawyer, he couldn't have accepted Cherry Graves as a client because of conflict of interest. For he was placed in the odd position of perhaps causing one client to lose her reward by working for another.

Fortunately, as a private detective, his responsibility lay more in

uncovering the truth than in serving a particular client's interests. And while Gannon was prepared to fight to the bitter end to see that Connie Stewart got her reward if she deserved it, he felt no compulsion to serve her interests at all costs. If he found that she didn't deserve it, he would work just as hard to prevent her from getting it.

CHAPTER V

During his years as a private detective Gannon had come to know practically every hotel employee in town. In the lobby he stopped at the desk and said to the day clerk, "Kevin Slater still live in room 122, Tom?"

The young man behind the desk nodded. "He's not there, though, Matt. I just saw him head for the coffee shop."

Gannon crossed the lobby to the coffee shop and went in. He found the night house detective at a table eating dry cereal and toast.

"Hi, Matt," Kevin Slater said cordially. "Sit down and I'll spring for a cup of coffee."

Seating himself, Gannon said, "What a soft life you lead. Breakfast at two P.M."

"Yeah, I'm spoiled," Slater said sarcastically. "I start to work about the time you're going to bed."

A waitress came over and took Gannon's order for coffee. When she moved away, Gannon said, "Cherry Graves just hired me to

re-investigate her robbery, Kevin."

The hotel detective looked surprised. "I thought that was all solved." He spooned cereal into his mouth.

"A new angle has come up. Want to tell me what happened that night?"

Slater chewed for a moment, swallowed and said, "It was all in the paper."

"I know. But I'd like to hear it first hand."

Slater shrugged. "You know the background, I guess. For three years every time Cherry Graves stayed here we'd been going through the same routine. It should have occurred to me that some sharpie might case the lay and knock me over some night. But I guess if I was smart enough to figure angles like that, I wouldn't be just a house detective."

"I know what your routine was," Gannon said. "Just what happened that night?"

The waitress delivered Gannon's coffee at that moment, and Slater waited until she had gone away again.

Then he said, "It was about eleven twenty or eleven twenty-five. Miss Graves gave me the jewel case as usual, I said goodnight and took the penthouse elevator down. When I opened the door at the eleventh floor, here was this character standing with a gun in his hand and a woman's stocking pulled over his head. We figured out afterward

that he must have been waiting in room 1136. That's right next to the elevator bank and it was vacant that night. He may have been waiting there for a couple of hours, for all we know. Anyway, it was a perfect spot for him to watch me and Miss Graves go up. Then, when he heard the penthouse elevator coming down again, all he had to do was step across the hall and wait for the door to open. He didn't have to be in the hall more than a second or two, because the instant I opened the door, he crowded me back to the rear of the car at gun-point and pulled the elevator door shut behind him so that we were out of sight of anyone who might suddenly appear in the hall."

"You described him as of average height and build," Gannon said. "What's your estimate of average?"

"I told the police five nine or ten, one sixty to one eighty."

"Fine," Gannon said sourly. "That fits either current suspect. Eddie Case was five nine and a hundred and sixty. The new one is five ten and a hundred and eighty. Which was the robber?"

Slater grinned at him. "Can you judge a man's height within an inch and his weight within twenty pounds at one quick look? That's all I got, because he ordered me to turn my back. I think I did pretty good to hold it within those limits." His grin faded and he asked curiously, "Who's this new suspect you have?"

"A friend of Case's," Gannon said noncommittally. He took a sip of his coffee. "Didn't any of the elevator operators remember a man of that size?"

"They remembered dozens. He was Mr. Average Man."

"They couldn't all have been dressed the same as your bandit. What was he wearing?"

Slater grinned again. "That new tropical weight dark blue. Every second man on the street is wearing it. The elevator operators remembered lots of men of average height and build in tropical weight blue. But none rode clear to the eleventh floor, or got on there to go down. Of course he could have gotten off at any floor and walked the rest of the way. We don't know within hours when he went upstairs, so we didn't expect much from the operators about his arrival. The time of his departure is pinpointed, though, and it was late enough for elevator traffic to be slim. The operators thought they remembered everyone who rode down from any floor, and they say no one of that height, build and dress did. Which means he probably took the fire stairs all the way down after pulling the job."

"Probably," Gannon agreed. "What happened after he made you turn your back?"

"He took the jewel case out of my hand and ordered me to cross my wrists behind my back. He taped them together, winding on enough tape to set a broken arm.

Then he made me lie on my stomach, taped my ankles and hogtied me. Last he taped my mouth shut. He didn't even bother to take away my gun. Which didn't help me any. I couldn't get at it anyway."

"You notice anything individual about his voice?"

"Yeah," Slater said sardonically. "It was muffled by the stocking over his head. Sorry I can't be of more help, Matt, but that's all there is to tell. Oh, yeah. One thing more. The gun was a thirty-eight automatic."

Gannon drank some more coffee. "That's what Eddie Case was holding in his hand when we found the body."

Slater elevated his eyebrows. "Then doesn't it seem reasonable that he pulled the job? According to the papers the jewels were in his room, a stocking mask was found there, and he had a long criminal record. Why's Cherry Graves having you make this re-investigation?"

"She just wants to be sure before she pays the reward." Finishing his coffee, Gannon rose to his feet. "Thanks for the information, Kevin. And for the coffee."

"I'm always willing to spring for coffee," Slater said with a grin. "Maybe the next time we meet will be in a bar, and it will be your turn."

"They serve coffee in bars too," Gannon said. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee and drink bourbon myself."

He left the coffee shop by its street entrance and walked around the corner to where he had parked his car. A moment later he was heading for Franklin Avenue.

When the plump, middle-aged landlady answered the door, she frowned at Gannon. "I thought the police were all through here," she said.

Apparently the woman assumed he was a police officer because he had been with Sergeant Clark the previous day. It might have simplified things to let her continue to have that misapprehension. But Gannon made a careful point of never giving the impression that he was a police officer. He had a lot of friends on the force, but even his cop friends frowned on people who impersonated policemen.

"I'm not with the police," he said. "I just happened to be with Sergeant Clark yesterday. I'm a private detective."

He showed her his license and she studied it narrowly. Then she asked, "What do you want?"

"I'm not here about yesterday's affair," he said. "I want to see another tenant of yours. William Wilde."

"Mr. Wilde? Well, I guess he can have what visitors he wants, so long as he keeps paying his rent." She held the door wide and stepped aside for him to enter.

Moving inside, Gannon asked, "What's his room number?"

"He's on third. Room 3-C. I

think he's in. Like Mr. Carson—or Case I guess his real name was—he hardly ever goes out before night-fall." Suddenly she frowned. "He's not another jewel thief, is he? Is Wilde a fake name too?"

"It's his real name," Gannon assured her. "I've known him for years. I'll find his room all right. You won't have to accompany me up."

He moved up the stairs and the landlady stood staring after him speculatively until he reached the top of the first flight. Then she shrugged and walked down the hall in the direction of her kitchen.

When Gannon rapped on the door of room 3-C, a gruff voice said, "It's open."

Gannon pushed open the door. A man of about thirty-five stood before a corner washbowl in his undershirt. Apparently he had just finished shaving, for he was drying a straight razor. When he glanced over his shoulder to see who his visitor was, a scowl formed on his face. Snapping the razor shut, he laid it on a shelf over the washbowl and turned to face the private detective.

"What do you want, Gannon?"

Pushing the door shut behind him, Gannon examined Billy Wilde in silence. He was a little surprised at the man's muscularity. Wearing a suitcoat, the ex-bookie had always given the impression of slimness. In his undershirt Gannon saw that he really possessed a superb muscu-

lar build. In fact he looked like a professional weight lifter.

"Well?" Wilde demanded when the silent examination had continued for some time.

Gannon glanced about the poorly furnished room. "You've come down in the world, Billy. You used to live in an expensive bachelor apartment."

The ex-bookie flushed. "It's my business how I live, Gannon."

"Not entirely," Gannon disagreed. "It's your business where you live, but not how. Not when you start making your living with a gun."

Billy Wilde's face lost all expression. "Who uses a gun?"

"You do. You goofed off some way and can't get your finger into any racket in this town any more. You're reduced to pulling two-bit stickups."

"You must be on the goof-juice, Gannon. Nobody has anything on me."

"I have," Gannon told him. "You should have stuck to filling stations. Big-time jewel heists are out of your class."

Wilde's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"The Cherry Graves job, Billy."

The man emitted a scoffing laugh. "What are you trying to pull, Gannon? The cops have already pinned that on Eddie Case."

"Sure, and he's conveniently dead so that he can't defend himself. He didn't pull the job any more than

I did. He was just disposing of the goods. What was your falling out about, Billy? Wasn't he getting rid of them fast enough to suit you?"

Wilde stared at him. "You trying to stick me with a murder rap? Get out of here, smart guy!"

Striding toward Gannon, he stared at him belligerently. "Well? Get moving!"

Gannon gave him the sort of smile deliberately designed to irritate. "We've got a lot more to talk about yet, Billy."

"Oh, no we haven't," Wilde said, throwing a whistling right at Gannon's chin.

The man was faster than Gannon had expected. He managed to roll with the blow, but there wasn't a chance of getting his head completely out of the way. The fist exploded on the point of his chin, smashing him back against the door. Momentarily everything went blank and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to let himself slowly slide down to a seated position.

Wilde reached down, grabbed both lapels and jerked Gannon to his feet. His head began to clear on the way up. Firmly planting his feet, he aimed his head at the man's chin and launched himself like a catapult. The top of his head crashed into Wilde's jaw with enough force to send him reeling backward.

Instantly Gannon was after him. With blurring speed he smashed a

left and a right to the man's jaw. Wilde's legs hit the edge of the bed and he fell on his back across it.

CHAPTER VI

Since Billy Wilde wasn't wearing a shirt, which would have offered a handhold, Gannon jerked him erect by the hair of his head.

"Ow!" Wilde said thickly. "That hurts."

Gannon stood him on tiptoe. "Want to go another round?" he inquired.

Unable to shake his head without risking the loss of some of his hair, Wilde said, "No. Let loose, Gannon."

Gannon released his handhold so suddenly, the man staggered and sat heavily on the bed. He stared up at the private detective aggrievedly.

"Now let's continue our conversation," Gannon suggested.

Wilde tenderly felt the top of his head. "I don't know nothing about that jewel robbery," he said in a sullen voice. "You're barking up the wrong tree."

"Eddie didn't pull it," Gannon said. "You were Eddie's best pal and you answer the description of the heister."

"What do you mean, best pal? We hoisted a few drinks together now and then, is all. What the hell, we lived in the same rooming house. Should I turn my back when I saw him?"

"Did you know who he was?"

Wilde gazed up at Gannon thoughtfully for a time, finally seemed to come to a decision. "I'm going to level with you, Gannon, so you'll know I've got nothing to hide. I knew he was Top-Price Eddie Case. Years back I knew everybody in the rackets, and he used to come in my bookie joint. And I knew he had some kind of big deal cooking, because he kept telling me he was going to be loaded before long. But I never asked him what the deal was, because I didn't want to know. I got enough troubles of my own."

Gannon said, "The deal must have been with you. You're the only man he had any association with."

"Yeah, I know," Wilde said disconsolately. "Eddie was strictly a ladies' man. He was working on two in the same line at the Purple Goose. I suppose one of them sicked you on me."

"Maybe."

"That would be Helene North. She never liked me. Connie Stewart wouldn't care what he did. She was only playing him for kicks anyway. She had another guy she was nuts about."

"Oh? Who?"

"I don't know his name. I spotted them in a bar downtown one afternoon. They were in a booth holding hands and making moon eyes at each other. Next time I got to the Purple Goose, I asked Connie who he was and she said her boy friend. She said he worked nights, and since she worked nights too, she

only got to see him afternoons. They didn't even have the same night off. But she talked about him like she was real gone."

"What did this man look like?" Gannon asked.

"A real distinguished-looking character. Like maybe he was a lawyer or something. Only he couldn't have been, or he wouldn't have been working nights. He looked a lot older than Connie, but he hadn't let himself go to pot. He was pretty well preserved."

Gannon stood staring silently at the seated man for some time. Billy Wilde shifted uneasily.

"Did I say something out of line?" he asked.

Gannon shook his head. "No, Billy," he said with sudden weariness. "As a matter of fact you've been very helpful."

Turning, he strode to the door, jerked it open and went out without glancing back. The man on the bed stared after him open-mouthed.

Fifteen minutes later Gannon was back at the Hotel Cavanaugh. After a glance into the coffee shop, he went over to the desk.

"See where Kevin Slater went after he left the coffee shop?" he asked the young clerk.

"He headed toward his room a few minutes ago, Matt."

Gannon walked to the rear of the lobby and down the short hall where hotel employees who were residents lived. He rapped on the door of room 122.

Kevin Slater, in shirt sleeves, opened the door with an inquiring look on his face. He grinned when he saw Gannon. "Back again? Come on in, Matt."

Gannon moved into the room. "Got any plans for this afternoon, Kevin?"

"None in-particular. Why?"

"Like you to take a little ride with me."

Slater examined him curiously. "Something concerning the jewel robbery?"

"Uh-huh. Thought you might like to be in on the end, since you were a victim."

The house detective nodded. "I would. The management was very understanding about it, but I felt like an ass being left all taped up like that. What have you got?"

"It'll keep," Gannon said. "Get your coat on."

Slater lifted a suitcoat from his closet and slipped into it. "I'm set."

"How about your gun?" Gannon asked.

Slater's eyebrows went up. "I'm not a city cop. I don't have to wear a gun off duty."

"Better today. I'm not carrying one, and we may need it."

"Oh? It's going to be that kind of party, is it?"

"Possibly."

With a shrug Slater crossed to a dresser and removed a holstered thirty-eight Detective Special from a top drawer. Pushing back his coat-tail, he clipped it to his belt.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," Gannon said. "Let's go."

Gannon drove the few blocks north to Hollywood Boulevard and turned east on Hollywood.

Slater asked, "Where we going, Matt?"

"Not far," Gannon said noncommittally. "We're almost there."

Driving with one hand, he pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and glanced at it. Thrusting it back into his pocket again, he began to study building numbers. After a block or two he pulled over to the curb in front of an apartment house. Getting out of the car, he rounded it and waited for the hotel detective to join him.

Kevin Slater got out of the car slowly. He gave Gannon a curious look. "Who lives here, Matt?"

"You'll see." Gannon took the man's elbow and steered him in the direction of the apartment building's main entrance.

"You don't have to push," Slater complained. "I can walk by myself."

"Then stop dragging your feet," Gannon told him.

Gently he nudged Slater through the door into a small entrance foyer. Releasing his elbow, Gannon studied the names beneath a bank of mailboxes.

"Apartment 4-A," he said. "That ought to be right down this lower hall."

Slater stared at him steadily. "What the devil is this, Matt?"

Gannon gave him a smile in which there was a touch of regret. Suddenly reaching out, he grabbed the hotel detective's right wrist, spun him around and twisted his arm up into the center of its back. He shoved the man face-first against the wall, reached under his coat and plucked his gun from its holster. Then he released him and stepped back.

Slater slowly turned around, rubbing his arm. Warily he examined the gun trained on him. "Have you gone nuts, Matt?"

"I may apologize in a couple of minutes," Gannon said. "But right now you march down this hall to apartment 4-A."

After examining Gannon broodingly for a moment, Slater started down the hall. The second door down was 4-A. Stopping before it, he gave Gannon an inquiring look.

Gannon stood to one side of the door, where he couldn't be seen by anyone opening it. In a calm but definite tone he said, "Now I want you to ring the bell, Kevin. But when the door is answered, you just stand there. If you say one word or make any kind of gesture, I'll put a bullet in your kneecap. Got it?"

Slater licked his lips. He said huskily, "I got it."

"All right. Ring the bell."

Reluctantly, sweat beading his upper lip, Slater pressed the doorbell button.

Musical chimes sounded from in-

side, then the click of a woman's high heels approached the door. Slater's gaze flicked sidewise.

"Eyes front," Gannon said in a low but sharp voice.

Slater obediently fixed his gaze on the door just as it opened.

"Kevin darling!" Connie Stewart's voice said in surprise. "What are you doing here? I thought you wanted us to stay away from each other for a while."

Kevin Slater's shoulders slumped. Stepping away from the wall, Gannon put a hand in the middle of his back and pushed him inside. Connie Stewart retreated backward before the two men, her eyes wide with shock at Gannon's sudden appearance. Gannon kicked the door shut behind him and dropped the pistol in his pocket.

He said, "That's what I was waiting to hear, Connie. The description fitted, but until you sounded off just now, I couldn't be sure Kevin was your secret love."

Connie Stewart gazed from Gannon to Slater and back again, her eyes frightened. "What is this?"

"The end of the road," Gannon told her. "It was a beautiful plan, but even the best ones sometimes blow up in your face. Whose idea was it, Kevin? Yours or hers?"

Slater sank into a chair and put his head in his hands. "It was all my idea, Matt. She didn't even know I was going to pull it."

"Nuts," Gannon said disgustedly. "That's a gallant gesture, but it

won't work. You didn't tape yourself up. She had to."

Slater raised his head. "No, Matt. How could she? She works from eight P.M. until two in the morning."

"Not on Mondays. It's her night off. You can't keep her out of it, Kevin. She obviously was the one who set up Top-Price Eddie Case. I doubt that you even knew him."

The girl said in a panic-stricken voice, "What are you both talking about?"

Gannon gave her a pained look. "Don't give me the innocent act, Connie. You're not a good enough actress. You know you're hooked."

Her eyes flicked back and forth from Gannon to Slater. She began to tremble. In a shaking voice she said, "I didn't have anything to do with it, Mr. Gannon. It was all Kevin's idea. All I did was mention that a girl named Helene North, who dances with me, had a new boy friend who called himself Sam Carson. But that I recognized him as Top-Price Eddie Case. I knew him from years back, when I went with a guy who turned out to be a stickup man and was a friend of Eddie's. Kevin took it from there."

Gannon nodded. "I imagine he did. How long have you been brooding over Cherry Graves's jewels, Kevin? Having them in your hands so often, and thinking about your lousy salary. But why didn't you just let Eddie Case fence them? Why'd you have to kill him?"

Slater merely gave his head a dull shake.

Gannon said, "I think I can guess. There had to be a patsy, because on a job like this, there's always suspicion of an inside man. You didn't want that hanging over your head. You wanted it cleaned up fast and closed as solved, before the cops started thinking about you. There probably wouldn't have been any more money in fencing them anyway. By the time you split with Case, you'd be lucky if your and Connie's share came to thirty-five thousand. The reward money was safer. But how'd you get Case to sit still for that fake suicide?"

Slater looked up at him. "You've got me cold on the heist, Matt. But you don't really expect me to sit here and confess to murder, do you?"

Gannon gave him a bleak smile. "I think I can reconstruct it, Kevin. Case had been out until six thirty A.M. You probably walked in on him while he was asleep and put a gun on him. Connie could have gotten you a copy of his room key by making a wax impression one of the nights he spent at her apartment. You made him get dressed and sit in the chair. Probably he didn't know what you intended to do even when you tossed the pillow in his lap. Was the thirty-eight automatic his, or one you picked up somewhere?"

"You figure it out, Matt. Even if

you manage to pin it on me, Connie's in the clear on that. She was with you all morning."

"She's still an accessory," Gannon said roughly. "She wouldn't have come to my office until she knew he was dead. You had to wait until the rewards were announced in the paper before you moved. As soon as the announcement appeared, you headed for Eddie Case and burned him. Then you must have phoned Connie that it was time to go into her act, and she came to my office with that cock-and-bull story. Case never gave her that ring, of course. You merely held it out of the loot to act as a stage prop. I doubt that Case even saw the loot. If you had turned it over to him, he might have loused things up by selling it before the rewards were announced. You probably stalled him, and never turned it over to him until a couple of minutes before you killed him. Then you planted that stocking mask . . .

The blonde said in a voice bordering on hysteria, "I didn't know there was going to be a killing. Kevin never told me that. All I did

was follow his instructions."

Kevin Slater glanced up at her reproachfully. Gannon said in a sardonic tone, "The reward for gallantry, Kevin. She's going to be a great help to you when she gets on the stand."

Glancing around the room, he spotted a phone in one corner and crossed to it. As he dialed police headquarters, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

He said to the hotel detective, "You know what, Kevin?"

"What?" Slater asked in a discouraged voice.

"I just realized I'm going to collect both those rewards. The insurance company sure as hell isn't going to pay an accomplice to the crime, and I'm next in line after Connie, because I relayed her information to the police. And I also meet the conditions set down by Cherry Graves."

Slater merely dropped his head into his hands again. The woman stared at Gannon with horrified indignation.

A voice in his ear said, "Police building."



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